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The Hidden God: A Posthumanist Genealogy of Pragmatism

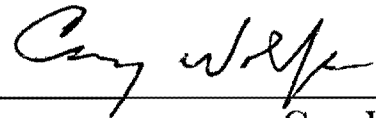
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Abstract

Departing from humanist models of American intellectual history, this dissertation proposes an alternative posthumanist approach to the thought of Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Charles Sanders Peirce. Beginning with Perry Miller's influential scholarship, American thought is often cast as a search for "face to face" encounters with the unaccountable God of Calvinism, a figure that eventually evolves to encompass Romantic notions of the aesthetic, imagination, or, most predominately, individual human feeling. This narrative typically culminates in the pragmatism of William James, a philosophy in which human feeling attains priority at the expense of impersonal metaphysical systems. However, alongside and against these trends runs a tradition that derives from the Calvinist distinction between a fallen material world and a transcendent God possessed of absolute sovereignty, a tradition that also anticipates posthumanist theory, particularly the self-referential distinction between system and environment that occupies the central position in Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. After systems theory, the possibility for "face to face" encounters is replaced with the necessary self-reference of communication and observation, an attribute expressed in Edwards, Emerson, and Peirce through, respectively, the figures of "true virtue," an absent and inexpressible grief and, in its most abstract form, Peirce's concept of a sign. In conclusion, Edwards, Emerson, and Peirce represent an alternative posthumanist genealogy of pragmatism that displaces human consciousness as the foundational ground of meaning, communication, or semiosis.

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Introduction

“The Eye is the First Circle”

“Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things.”

--Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar” (*Prose* 57)

American philosophy begins in an encounter with nature. In “The American Scholar,” Emerson announces, “The first in time and first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature. Every day, the sun; and, after sunset, night and her stars. Ever the winds blow; ever the grass grows. Every day, men and women, conversing, beholding and beholden” (*Prose* 57). The scholar is what Emerson calls “man thinking,” the one most stricken with nature’s mystery: “What is nature to him? There is never a beginning, there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself” (*Prose* 57). Confronting the world as a circle for which—like Augustine’s God—the center is everywhere and the circumference nowhere, Emerson proposes a symmetrical relationship between the unboundedness of nature and its reflection in the human mind: “He shall see, that nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part to part. One is seal, one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind...And, in fine, the ancient precept, ‘Know thyself,’ and the modern precept, ‘Study nature,’ become at last one maxim” (*Prose* 58). These words would seem to suggest something like a perfected dualism, an achievement of harmony between mind and nature in which every point finds its mirrored likeness in the other, part to part.

The seemingly insurmountable divide between mind and nature is then overcome through a spontaneous symmetry or magnetic attraction, a facet of Emerson’s thought that Russell B. Goodman identifies with “the marriage of self and world” (35) characteristic of the European romantic tradition. As Goodman writes, this tradition

supposes that “If our feelings, including our moral feelings...help constitute the world, then the world becomes something valuable in itself, or ‘ideal.’ The unknowable noumenal overflow recedes or disappears, becoming part of phenomenal reality, the only reality there is. If ‘human forms of feeling’ reveal the phenomenal world, then at least part of the noumenal has been recovered, and part of the supernatural has been naturalized” (32). This emphasis on “human forms of feeling” may also, as Goodman then argues, be connected with the eventual emergence of American pragmatism: “Both James and Dewey follow Emerson in focusing on the shaping power of the human mind, holding that the world we know is a malleable product of our pragmatically determined concepts...Whether through their interest in feeling, in religious experience, in imagination, or in the shaping powers of the mind, the American Romantic philosophers seek to expand the narrow focus of classical empiricism while retaining the empiricist commitment to human experience for our knowledge of the world” (57). Here, in a single sweeping gesture, a continuous tradition emerges to connect Emerson’s engagements with nature to an emphasis on the role of personal feeling in grounding a pragmatic relationship to the world in the philosophy of William James and John Dewey.

Broadly speaking, the identification of this continuity in American thought belongs to a familiar tradition of romanticist and humanist engagements with modernity, in particular the process of secularization deriving from what Michel Foucault identifies as a conviction that “the manifestation and sign of truth are to be found in evident and distinct perception” (56). Following a loss of faith in the hierarchical cosmos described by medieval religious dogma, new foundations were secured on the somewhat shaky ground of man’s innate sensual and rational faculties. Absent the transcendent authority of God, the mysteries of the universe could still be plumbed to their depths through the

transparent observational powers afforded by science and rationalism—powers that derived their authority from what modern humanism postulated as a unique ability to encounter the world in itself (at least momentarily) through the self-present immediacy of consciousness, without the trappings of any interpretive filter: “man became that upon the basis of which all knowledge could be constituted as immediate and non-problematized evidence” (345). Following from this, as Cary Wolfe writes, “the philosophical situation of modernity” lead to an “ungrounding of reason” that “invites the various forms of idealism that have been attributed to romanticism in the all-too-familiar narratives of secularization, where Mind, Spirit, Imagination, or the equivalent comes to take the place of self-generated knowledge and its authority previously reserved for God” (*Posthumanism* 244).

From his vantage point in the mid-twentieth century, Perry Miller’s seminal readings of the early American “life of the mind” follow this familiar pattern by tracing the decline of religious authority and resultant affirmation of the possibility for personal revelation:

From the time of Edwards to that of Emerson, the husks of Puritanism were being discarded, but the energies of many Puritans were not yet diverted—they could not be diverted—from a passionate search of the soul and of nature, from the quest to which Calvinism had devoted them. These New Englanders—a few here and there—turned aside from the doctrines of sin and predestination, and thereupon sought with renewed fervor for the accents of the Holy Ghost in their own hearts and in woods and mountains. But now that the restraining hand of theology was withdrawn, there was nothing to prevent them, as there had been everything to prevent Edwards, from identifying their intuitions with the voice of

God, or from fusing God and nature into the one substance of the transcendental imagination. Mystics were no longer inhibited by dogma. They were free to carry on the ancient New England propensity for reeling and staggering with new opinions. They could give themselves over, unrestrainedly, to becoming transparent eyeballs and debauchees of dew (*Errand* 203).

In particular, Miller's landmark studies of Jonathan Edwards seek to rescue the Puritan minister from the darkness of medieval religious doctrine still beholden to a stern and unknowable divinity by drawing him and his God into the daylight of modern humanist understanding. Miller links Edwards to Emerson through a mutual turn to nature in the grip of a "sense of the heart"—which is to say that the quest for immediacy is a quest for a self-grounding experience of subjective feeling: "If the object—be it thing, word, abstract idea, simple idea or 'mixed mode'—is vividly realized, the mind is in a healthy relation with truth. But if the only object the mind has in view is a word, a counter for mechanical discourse, a verbal substitute, the mind is diseased and piety is bankrupt" ("Heart" 127). As Emerson succinctly puts it, "Our faith comes in moments; our vice is habitual" (*Prose* 163). On this basis Miller powerfully argues that American thought derives from a search for personal religious experience, a turn to nature that simultaneously turns inward to reveal divine truth, setting the stage for Emerson's rhetorical question in *Nature*: "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" (*Prose* 27). Miller argues that Edwards also turns away from a transcendental understanding: "In Edwards' 'sense of the heart' there is nothing transcendental; it is rather a sensuous apprehension of the total situation" ("Heart" 127). Drawing upon these insights, Miller quite brilliantly traces an historical lineage that extends from Edwards's sensuous subjectivity to Emerson's *Nature*—in the process forming the dominant model

(whether acknowledged or not) for many subsequent understandings of American intellectual history.

In a more contemporary setting, Stanley Cavell's important writings on Emerson engage with the American romantic tradition in a quite different way. Cavell reads Emerson through the prism of philosophical skepticism, what he often calls the romantic disappointment with Kantian philosophy, the outcome of which is "to deny that you can experience the world as world, things as things; face to face, as it were, call this the life of things" (*Quest* 53). As he writes,

I continue in this lecture to be guided by the thought of romanticism as working out a crisis of knowledge, a crisis I have taken to be (interpretable as) as response at once to the threat of skepticism and to a disappointment with philosophy's answer to this threat, particularly as embodied in the achievement of Kant's philosophy—a disappointment most particularly with the way Kant balances the claims of knowledge of the world to be what you may call subjective and objective, or, say, the claims of knowledge to be dependent on or independent of the specific endowments—sensuous and intellectual—of the human being. And in turn perhaps means a disappointment in the idea of taking the success of science, or what makes science possible, as an answer to the threat of skepticism, rather than a further expression of it. Romanticism's work here interprets itself, so I have suggested, as the task of bringing the world back to life (*Quest* 52).

The Kantian "settlement" is in this sense the trade off between knowing the contents of experience without knowing the "thing-in-itself"—to be bereft of an intimate relationship with the external world: "To settle with skepticism...to assure us that we do know the existence of the world or, rather, that what we understand as knowledge is *of* the world,

the price Kant asks us to pay is to cede any claim to know the thing in itself, to grant that human knowledge is not of the things as they are in themselves" (*Transcendental* 63).

For Cavell, the desire for "face to face" encounters is always demoralized by the ongoing and ever-present threat of skepticism, and thus Emerson's sense of self is not understandable as *achievable*, or only achieved by a certain "onwardness" or abandonment, the intrusion of what Emerson calls the "opposing force" pushing towards the future. In Emerson's text, Cavell finds "the *Critique of Pure Reason* turned upon itself: notions of limitation and of condition are as determining in the essay 'Fate' as they are in Kant, but it is as if these terms are themselves subjected to transcendental deduction...Emerson is, I believe, commonly felt to play fast and loose with something like contradiction in his writing; but I am speaking of a sense in which contradiction, the countering of diction, is the genesis of his writing of philosophy" (*Transcendental* 113).

Cavell thus revises Miller's classically romanticist understanding for one that supposes that the achievement of an intimate relationship with the world remains out of reach. In its place Cavell proposes an "acceptance of separateness" or "loss of the world" (*Transcendental* 132) at the heart of Emerson's philosophy (especially his later essays) that continually cuts the legs out from underneath any possibility for intimacy, sacrificing or expelling experience of the present (or presence) for the sake of the future. As Cary Wolfe notes, Cavell's sense of Emerson's purposeful vacillations, the persistent reversals in essays like "Experience" and "Fate," suggests that "Emersonian perfectionism may thus be conceived as a kind of ongoing act of radical negative capability that provides the foundation (though that is eventually not the word we would want, of course) for democratic relations with others, with those other selves I have not yet been but who also—and this is the engine of Emerson's constant polemical project—need to surpass

themselves, in an ongoing process of democracy conceived as otherness always yet to be achieved, or *if* achieved, only achieved in the present by the other and not by me” (*Posthumanism* 248). It may be noted that these words form an idea of an “unlimited” community that is evoked in the thought of Charles S. Peirce, but for Wolfe they also emphasize “Emerson’s insistence on the contingency, not transcendence of observation” (*Posthumanism* 250). In other words, Emerson emerges as a philosopher deeply engaged with the question of the inescapably embedded (and thus always partial or limited) relationship between mind and nature, that the mind is fully *within* nature, one might say encircled by it.

When observed through these lenses, it becomes possible to see that Emerson’s idea of “part to part” symmetry is overtaken by an image of something altogether less familiar, less a depiction of romantic intimacy and harmony than an irruption of asymmetrical otherness. As already quoted, the immanence of God’s creation resolves into what he describes as “always circular power returning into itself.” In “The Method of Nature,” the image returns: nature as “a work of *ecstasy*, to be represented by a circular movement” (*Prose* 84). In “Circles” the image adopts a fractal repetition: “The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end...there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning” (*Prose* 174). This vision of a circle re-entering itself suggests something like a Möbius strip, a turning inside out and outside in; as if simultaneously nature contains the mind and the mind contains nature. Turning inward to the self would then diffuse the self into the great impersonal expanse of nature, and turning outward to nature inevitably brings to bear an encounter with one’s own face. Beholding, it would seem, is then beholden, and seeing is seen. “You are one thing,” Emerson writes, “but nature is *one thing and the other thing*, in the

same moment” (*Essays* 581). These words seem to gesture towards the embedded or contingent aspect of observation—that observation *of* nature takes place *in* nature. Such ideas—a double gesture that takes at the very moment it gives, what Emerson often calls an “aversion” or “antagonism”—are not uncommon in his writings, and in fact Emerson’s text is replete with observational paradoxes that destabilize the symmetrical or part to part harmony of mind and nature, leading to what Wolfe calls the “insistent strangeness, the unremittingly heretical quality, of his writing, in which a signature feature is to take precisely the turn of thought or phrase that seems to undermine at a stroke the entire argument just made, a seemingly relentless drive to pursue thought where it may lead, even into paradox and conceptual meltdown” (*Posthumanism* 239). Familiar understandings of romanticism or skepticism cannot cope with this “insistent strangeness”—a method of writing, it would seem, that disrupts the complacency of consistent interpretations by making them fall over into their contrary.

Wolfe points the way to an unexpected resource for understanding this feature of Emerson’s thought that avoids Cavell’s insistence on the force of philosophical skepticism because “skepticism remains tied, one might argue, to the representationalism [Cavell] would otherwise seem to disown, because skepticism holds on to the desire for a representational adequation between concepts and objects even as it knows that desire to be unappeasable” (*Posthumanism* 250). Instead of skepticism Wolfe turns to the “second-order” systems theory of Niklas Luhmann. As he notes, “Luhmann’s work on observation will help to clarify why Emerson’s relentless explorations of these problems cannot and should not resolve themselves into a dialectic” (*Posthumanism* 251). More generally, the gambit of this study is that bringing to bear the self-referential theories of observation and communication in contemporary systems theory raises the possibility of a counter-

tradition in American thought that is very different from the humanist model, a tradition in which the philosophical and theological writings of Edwards, Emerson and Peirce perform a questioning of the foundational immanence of feeling by stressing its contingency, a questioning that in turn derives from the very theological tradition that Miller claimed was slowly abandoned by American philosophy. In fact, as Wolfe claims, “the closest thing we could find to Emerson’s work in the theological tradition would be not Quakerism or Unitarianism but the line of medieval theology that works its way from Saint Augustine through John Scotus Eriugena to the fifteenth-century theologian Nicholas Cusanus” (*Posthumanism* 253). One not need look far to find the American provenance of this Augustinian heritage in the Calvinism of the early Puritans. Indeed, as Miller writes, “The soul of Puritan theology is the hidden God, who is not fully revealed even in His own revelation” (*New England Mind* 21).

Attending to decidedly non-romantic religious traditions brings to the fore the fact that the question deflected by romantic or secular philosophies of the subject is how the world may observe itself, how observation *of* nature can take place *in* nature. As mathematician George Spencer-Brown puts it, “It seems hard to find an acceptable answer to the question of how or why the world conceives a desire, and discovers an ability, to see itself, and appears to suffer the process” (105). Bereft of the transcendent observing powers of God supposed by traditional theology, romanticism makes the discovery, as Luhmann notes, of its own autonomy: “Romanticism discovers itself as if new born in an empty space and called upon to give itself its own meaning” (“Redescription” 513). Because of this, romanticism marks the transition “from hierarchical fixed positional orders describable as nature to the primacy of the distinction between self- and hetero-reference” (“Redescription” 512). Luhmann ultimately sees this

predicament (the predicament, as it were, of modernity) as the inescapable and paradoxical necessity of *self*-reference, a derivation of meaning from “inside” without access to any authoritative or objective “outside,” “[The system] owes its stability to itself, not to its elements; it constructs itself upon a foundation that is entirely not ‘there’” (*Social Systems* 48). In American thought this problem coalesces around the image of a circle on a blank page, an image that for Edwards, Emerson, and Peirce takes on something like a fractal recursiveness, a repetition of circles within circles. This is a notion that seeks to address problems of autonomy and contingency, ultimately problems of *self*-reference, without recourse to the traditional escape hatches that emerged after Kant in the form of feeling, imagination, *geist*, and many others.

Luhmann’s “radical constructivism” likewise avoids recourse to romanticism’s evasions of contingency, its collapse of the world into unity or wholeness, by supposing that self-reference is simultaneously *other*-reference, but only in the manner of a paradox:

There is an external world—which results from the fact that cognition, as a self-operated operation, can be carried out at all—but we have no direct contact with it. Cognition could not reach the external world without cognition. In other words, cognition is a self-referential process. Knowledge can know only itself, although it can—as if out of the corner of its eye—determine that this is possible only if there is more than mere cognition. Cognition deals with an external world that remains unknown and, as a result, has to come to see that it cannot see what it cannot see (*Theories* 129).

Self-reference, in other words, leads to the conclusion that “the epistemologist him/herself becomes a rat in the labyrinth and has to reflect on the position from which he/she observes the other rats” (“Cognition” 250). One can only observe, in other words,

by making a *distinction*, by adopting an observational position which then hides something else. As Luhmann notes, “No traditional epistemology...could dare to go this far—obviously because the position from which it would have had to deal with distinctness was occupied by theology” (“Cognition” 250). What this means is that “The partner for radical constructivism is therefore not traditional epistemology, but traditional theology” (“Cognition” 251). In the American religious inheritance of the Puritans one finds an emphasis on the “hidden God” as the unseen, occluded, and radically *unavailable* “outside” that runs through Edwards to Emerson and Peirce, secularized but never truly domesticated. It is then systems theory which best allows for a description of *posthumanist* trends in American thought because, perhaps unexpectedly, it is systems theory, and not humanism, that draws our attention to the unseen, “the indistinct which once was called *God*, and today, if one distinguishes system and environment, is called *world*, or, if one distinguishes object and cognition, *reality*” (“Cognition” 252).

Systems theory, as will be argued, also helps mark out the critical difference between the Jamesian and Peircean forms of pragmatism. Both conceive of thought not as representational but instrumental, but while James accomplishes this conversion through an emphasis on feeling, an insistence on the primacy of an “inside” that remains resistant to the “outside” of rational absolutes, Peirce’s pragmatism had, as he put it, “nothing to do with qualities of feeling” (EP2 402). James enacts a distinction between the outside of conceptual thought and the inside of feeling that Peirce turns inside out to form the asymmetrical (triadic, not dualistic) structure of a sign—the sense in which, as Peirce puts it, “man” may be conceived as an “external sign.” In Peirce’s philosophy feeling becomes the paradoxically excluded “outside” and inaccessible basis of pragmatic thinking, its “not there” as Luhmann might put it.

This study often circle back to the primal scene of a distinction, an act that indicates one thing only to lose sight of the other—an act that is then in some sense always exceeding (or succeeding) itself. In America, this idea begins with the Calvinist distinction between the transcendent sovereignty of God and a fallen material creation, a distinction that repeats itself in its formal characteristics in the subjects to follow. This is not to claim that there is a direct transmission of content from Calvinism to Peirce (such a model of transmission is in fact under severe interrogation here) but only the recurrence of an intellectual problem which takes the *form* of a self-referential distinction. This is then a book about, to borrow the title of Spencer-Brown's analysis of distinctions, the "laws of form."

The paradigmatic case throughout is Luhmann's central distinction between a system and an environment of infinitely greater complexity. The system, in other words, functions through a reduction of the complexity of the environment. The distinction is a boundary, a circle that marks a line between "inside" and "outside." But this is not the whole story, because the system cannot function (cannot "communicate") unless the initial distinction (system/environment) is copied into the system itself. The mark of distinction, then, reappears inside the system and enacts a determinative oscillation: "The mark is repulsed and attracted by the paradox of the re-entry, as it were, and the world becomes ordered in this interplay of repulsion and attraction. Beginning and end are the same, and not the same; and in between (or: in the meantime) the world achieves its organized complexity" ("Paradox" 18). Every end is a beginning, and every private virtue, every circle, every sign refers through the paradox of self-referential closure, just out of the corner of its eye, to the infinitely open.

Chapter One

The Control of Control: Pragmatism, Humanism, and the Hidden God

“The actual universe is a thing wide open, but rationalism makes systems, and systems must be closed.”

—William James (498)

Pragmatism, as William James declared in a lecture of 1906 that bore the title of the new American philosophy, calls on “the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality, and the pretence of finality in truth” (509). A few years later he writes, “Nature is but a name for excess; every point in her opens out and runs into the more” (760). These words evoke a uniquely American way of thinking, a bearing or “attitude of orientation” (510) towards nature inherited from the antinomian thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Jonathan Edwards. It recalls Emerson’s “original relationship to the universe” as opposed to the inhuman and unnatural abstractions of European metaphysics. For the American pragmatist ideas are not isolated representations of abstract truth but are in contact with a natural world—an excess, flux, or overflowing that surges past the confinements of conceptual thought. Thought runs up against its limits through contact with nature understood as a vast openness in contrast to the closed systems of the purely rational. Nature is then the space of abandonment, a path of flight from the prison of impersonal language.

Nature is then not relegated to an inaccessible “outside” but is in fact the *most* “inside,” the most present, an immediacy that reveals itself through the confrontation between thought and sensation. The turn to nature is a turn to the resources of feeling—or more precisely an act of *turning* because in the completion of a turn one merely faces in a new form the totalizing grasp of a particular theoretical, conceptual, or philosophical

apparatus. Our thoughts may be inherently belated, but the thought of pragmatism makes disengagement possible, a way of transition through the potentially disruptive interface between thinking and feeling. As Giles Gunn writes, the perspective of pragmatism is “beyond ideology and transcendence alike not because it can escape their superventions but only because it can resist their simplifications” (36). The power of this resistance resides in the turn to the immediacy of feeling—a realm that remains defiant to the defacement of its expression in formal thought or language.

“Turn your face toward sensation,” James commands in *A Pluralistic Universe*, “that flesh-bound thing which rationalism has always loaded with abuse” (746). Pragmatism then turns away from what James calls the “foreignness and monstrosity” (775) of concepts and absolutes, thoughts which heedlessly engage in a distortion of reality: “Take any *real* bit, suppress its environment and then magnify it to monstrosity, and you get identically the type of structure of the absolute” (766). Turning to feeling or sensation reconnects ideas with the environment from which they arose, finding there “a fulness of content that no conceptual description can equal” (760). With concepts, by contrast, one finds that “in the deeper sense of giving *insight* they have no theoretic value, for they quite fail to connect us with the inner life of the flux, or with the causes that govern its direction. Instead of being interpreters of reality, concepts negate the inwardness of reality altogether” (740). This passage contains a number of key words and themes that James often opposes to the absolutes of philosophical thinking. The emphasis on *insight*, together with the use of *inner* and *inwardness*, implies a movement inside, an insistence on the intimate, immanent, and immediate—not as truth-values in themselves but as the means for resisting the imposition of truth from outside. For James, as Frank Lentricchia argues, “immediate experience is the single generative ground of knowing and being, the last and

only Garden of modern man, the Eden from which he, in his radical autonomy, can be expelled only by himself, by an exercise of the simultaneously redemptive and self-damning transmutational powers of his own mind, by his desire to create a world apart from the one immediately, blessedly given” (“Romanticism” 108). Philosophy, in other words, remains opposed to the inward plenitude of immediate experiences because it pretends to impose truth claims from a position outside of them.

Accordingly, pragmatism engages in a turn towards one thing and away from another: “A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power” (509). James’s copious and lively writings are filled with such images, a rejection of abstraction going hand in hand with an intimate embrace of actual experience, a turn away from outside impositions. As Gunn notes, pragmatism permits “consciousness to explore what yet remained ineffable and undecidable but still irrepressible on its own borders. James spoke of this as the ‘reinstatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life.’ What he meant by ‘the vague’ was that whole mysterious shadow world of feeling, intuition, implication, conjunction, disjunction, and change that undergirds cognition and motivates action” (141). What this also means is that *having* an experience and *thinking* about it are for James always two different things. One must come first, must be original, while the other always comes after and remains helplessly retroactive. Pragmatism is a middle way, “a mediating way of thinking” (504) described by Isabelle Stengers as a constraint, like bumpers in the gutters of a bowling lane: “a thinking that accepts as a constraint the exclusion of every

idea that implies, among its consequences, a transmutation of *our* reasons into *Reason*” (“William James” 19). *Reason* is pluralized, de-capitalized, and removed from the heavenly spheres and re-embedded in the contexts from which it issues—it is given, in other words, what James calls an *environment*.

Pragmatism revels in the original experience of concrete action as that which is fundamentally resistant to a descriptive postscript, the reality behind our conceptual designs, while thought, or the thinking of philosophy, remains a faceless monstrosity, a thoroughly impersonal reconstruction of an event that is gone as soon as it is recorded. It negates reality, falsifies it: “What these people experience *is* Reality. It gives us an absolute phase of the universe. It is the personal experience of those best qualified in our circle of knowledge to *have* experience, to tell us *what is*. Now what does *thinking about* the experience of these persons come to, compared to directly and personally feeling it as they feel it?” (499). Experience is always something that someone in a particular place at a particular time is able to *have*.

In the climactic claim of the 1906 lecture James announces, “*Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest*. We don’t lie back upon them, we move forward, and, on occasion, make nature over again by their aid. Pragmatism unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one at work” (510). Again the pragmatic method reveals itself as a turning between immediate experience and the mechanical system of the world. On one side is the instrumentality of thought, the world as workshop. On the other side James affirms the primacy of “sensational immediacy” (754) as a space apart. James thus turns away from a Platonic conception of rational thinking as a gateway to an absolute picture of the world. Instead of being placed under the subordination of inhuman and impersonal Ideas, impositions from the “outside,” man becomes a possessor

of beliefs which bring him into a working relationship with his world, instigating what James calls a kind of humanism: “In our cognitive as well as in our active life we are creative. We *add*, both to the subject and to the predicate part of reality. The world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands. Like the kingdom of heaven, it suffers human violence willingly. Man *engenders* truths upon it” (599). The world is not simply a Laplacian total machine, but a machine with an extra element, a workshop that includes a sovereign user of tools.

In this respect, pragmatism represents a peculiar reaction to the rising tide of scientific determinism in the nineteenth century, what Max Weber famously called “the disenchantment of the world.” Consequent upon the discoveries of Newton, Darwin, and Clausius was the realization of the world as a faceless, even monstrous, mechanical system—a world that, it seemed increasingly likely, must do without the guiding hand of divine providence. Taking control in God’s place were the impersonal mechanisms of natural law, evolution, and entropy. In his study of American religious experience as a manifestation of counter-Enlightenment tendencies, Leigh Eric Schmidt describes the progress of the modern scientific viewpoint as the “devocalization” of the world, a privileging of sight (the objective and impersonal observational stance of science) at the expense of the passive or receptive qualities of hearing (one might call this knowledge of the *unseen*), in the process representing modernity’s abandonment of the “primacy of the living voice over the dead letter” (31). In similar fashion, James would explicitly describe these trends as a de-personalization of the world, and Jacques Barzun goes so far as to argue that James was “the man who showed that ‘personality’ is an elemental force among others in the cosmos” (302). James campaigned against what he called the “systematic denial on science’s part of personality as a condition of events,” and its belief

that “in its own essential and innermost nature our world is a strictly impersonal world” (700). John Patrick Diggins notes that James was “preoccupied with self-knowledge, introspection, and personal consciousness” (116). Indeed, it might be argued that the great majority of James’s psychological and philosophical writings are concerned with the inability of modern rational thought to represent the flux of private conscious experience. His pragmatism capitalizes on this failure in order to preserve and protect an inner space of feeling apart from the impersonal mechanisms of the world.

As James often notes, science offers a means of increased control over the natural world that is ironically purchased at the expense of individual human agency and meaning:

The scope of the practical control of nature newly put into our hand by scientific ways of thinking vastly exceeds the scope of the old control grounded on common sense. Its rate of increase accelerates so that no one can trace the limit; one may even fear that the *being* of man may be crushed by his own powers, that his fixed nature as an organism may not prove adequate to stand the strain of the ever increasingly tremendous functions, almost divine creative functions, which his intellect will more and more enable him to wield. He may drown in his wealth like a child in a bath-tub, who has turned on the water and who can not turn it off (568).

Indeed, pragmatism in the hands of James simultaneously represents both the apotheosis of and most powerful reaction against what James Beniger has described as the emergence of control technologies in the late nineteenth century. In this context, James’s descriptions of the intellectual landscape of his day are compelling principally for their underlying anxiety, a sense that as such controls extend ever further they may encompass

and engulf even man himself. For instance, Frank Lentricchia has ingeniously argued that James's model of selfhood valiantly turns the logic of private property against itself in order to "preserve a human space of freedom, however interiorized, from the vicissitudes and coercions of the marketplace" (*Modernist* 31). Similarly, in "The Will to Believe" James writes, "When one turns to the magnificent edifice of the physical sciences, and sees how it was reared; what thousands of disinterested moral lives of men lie buried in its mere foundations; what patience and postponement, what choking down of preference, what submission to the icy laws of outer fact are wrought into its very stones and mortar; how absolutely impersonal it stands in its vast augustness—the how besotted and contemptible seems every little sentimentalist who comes blowing his voluntary smoke-wreaths, and pretending to decide things from out of his private dream!" (461). The "icy laws of outer fact" are in fact the corollary of pragmatism's turn to feeling, even its precondition. That is, the primacy of feeling implies and depends upon an emphasis on thought as an instrument or tool that presages something resembling what is now called information: "There can *be* no difference anywhere that does n't *make* a difference elsewhere—no difference in abstract truth that does n't express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere, and somewhen" (508). This passage pointedly demonstrates the distinction between thinking and feeling at work in James's pragmatism because the outside of "abstract" truth runs concomitant with the inside represented by concrete facts and conducts, the specific, unique, and personal. A double gesture prevails: an instrumentalization of thought in turn preserving an interior space of personal feeling, a kind of purification or purging of the impersonal, foreign, and monstrous. Control, in this sense, is then controlled.

As far as James is concerned there is thus no possibility of retreat to the old rationalisms and religions, those traditional bulwarks against the rising waters of determinism: “You escape indeed the materialism that goes with the reigning empiricism; but you pay for your escape by losing contact with the concrete parts of life” (494). Pragmatism attempts to do both sides justice: “I offer the oddly-named thing pragmatism as a philosophy that can satisfy both kinds of demand. It can remain religious like the rationalisms, but at the same time, like the empiricisms, it can preserve the richest intimacy with facts” (500). This intimacy is accomplished through an observation of the limits of rationalism and science by gesturing towards the falsification or negation of the flux of immediate experience: “to understand life by concepts is to arrest its movement, cutting it up into bits as if with scissors, and immobilizing these in our logical herbarium where, comparing them as dried specimens, we can ascertain which of them statically includes or excludes which other” (739). Within and against the looming impersonal machinations of the universe James affirms the reality of feeling as opposed to the impersonal abstractions of philosophical or scientific systems; systems that, James reminds us, are always closed and free from any relation to an environment. “*Nothing* real,” he claims, “escapes from having an environment” (775).

Perry Miller and the Hidden God

As noted at the outset, James’s notion of an environment revealed through a turn towards sensation or feeling as the corollary to nature was not an entirely novel development in American thought. It derives from a distinctly American tradition of religious experience that runs counter to Enlightenment rationalisms. As Schmidt

observes, “Enlightenment epistemologies (whether Lockean, Common-Sense, or Kantian) demanded the disciplining of religious enthusiasm, a confinement of those ‘ungrounded fancies of a man’s own brain’ within a secure domain from which reason and the state might avoid contamination” (191). Along these lines, James’s response to the intellectual and spiritual dilemmas of the turn of the century had deep roots that ran as far back as the dawning of modernity, but in strictly American terms it derived from the religious inheritance of Calvinism and its picture of a material world characterized by what Calvin quite memorably termed “total depravity”—in effect bequeathing to his followers in the American colonies a set of formidable intellectual difficulties. Calvin’s God, possessed of absolute omnipotence beyond even the formulation of natural laws, represented an environment of an altogether less reassuring (perhaps even threatening) sort, but one that nevertheless prefigures James’s understanding of the excess or flux of nature in the manner of an absolute chaos irreducible to scientific or rationalistic description, but one that James will ultimately reduce to what he called a “pantheistic field of vision” (644). As Diggins notes, “if James was rescuing philosophy from science, he was also liberating modern religion from its Protestant heritage in Calvinist determinism” (130).

In his classic 1935 essay “The Marrow of Puritan Divinity,” Perry Miller placed his finger upon a tension in Puritan theology that, through the twists and turns of its unfolding, would become one of the central problems of American intellectual life in the 18th and 19th centuries. It resulted, in sum, from Calvin’s intractable demand that his followers “contemplate, with steady, unblinking resolution, the absolute, incomprehensible, and transcendent sovereignty of God” (*Errand* 56). Faced as they were with the practical necessity of survival in an unfamiliar wilderness and the creation of a religious community that may serve as a shining example to European Christendom, the

Puritans found this an impossibly tall order. In actual practice, they could only attempt to constrain that sovereignty through a covenant that provided a stable and knowable world, thus “bringing God to time and reason” (*Errand* 51). As Miller tells it, the Puritans found themselves confronting a common intellectual dilemma of the seventeenth century: how to reconcile a material and mechanical world utterly devoid of grace with a sense of human agency. This is the question of the extent to which the universe is knowable, and how we may know it “without reducing the Divinity to a mechanism, without depriving Him of unpredictability, absolute power, fearfulness, and mystery” (*Errand* 56). How is intimacy with either God or nature possible on these conditions?

Ultimately, this tension derives from what Herschel Baker has called the essentially anthropocentric premises of seventeenth century theologies. As Baker puts it, “In the main stream of Christian humanism man’s prestige was immense; in the theology which Calvin had revived primarily to combat such optimism man’s degradation was made the pivotal fact of history. The seventeenth century, inheriting both views, spent its best efforts, as we shall see, in trying to resolve the antinomy” (25). With Thomas Aquinas representing one pole and John Calvin the other, Baker demonstrates that both take as their point of departure a certain form of humanism, or just as essentially its negative mirror image:

By emphasizing one rather than another of its components St Thomas could construct his massive theology of reason, Calvin his of will – but both the Angelic Doctor and the Tyrant of Geneva were securely within the limits of the Christian epic. Their views of man were radically different, yet both derived from the central tradition of western thought. They appeared to be primarily concerned with the nature of God, and to adjust all the facts of the physical, spiritual, and

moral universe to God; yet at the hidden center of both their systems was man – essentially good or essentially bad – and the whole universe took its meaning with reference to him, his nature, and his needs. Their systems were of course theistic, but the main lines of those systems radiated from an anthropocentric hub (9).

Baker argues that the Puritan confrontation with the antinomies of modern theology and philosophy was undergirded with a humanistic basis: “They wished to preserve untainted the sovereignty of God, yet they were reluctant to leave man and nature in the hopeless iniquity described by the early Reformers” (102). The Puritan could not depend for security on an intuitive rational consciousness that could accurately represent the world—nor could he, as Calvin may have wished, cast himself entirely upon the whims of Divine providence.

In a succession of beautifully written and still incisive works, Miller investigated this dilemma and the series of compromises it entailed, sketching a vivid picture of the American Puritan as a hopelessly conflicted figure, one marked through the very foundation of his or her being with a breach—an emerging modern subject which nonetheless turns upon the supposed rational certainty that subjecthood guarantees as suspect as best and impious blasphemy at worst. Charged with the contradictory aims of modern philosophical humanism and providentialist Calvinism, the Puritan was in the unique position of being able to observe the unsustainable basis of the reductionism of modern science in the form God’s absolute sovereignty, a sovereignty principally represented as an unapproachable limit. As Baker notes,

Though among the most zealous devotees of the doctrine of providence, the Puritans were not unsympathetic to science or to a Baconian scrutiny of natural processes. None the less, they insisted that providence be acknowledged as the

surest sign of God's sovereignty, for unless they could keep inviolate the heart of God's sovereignty and mystery from the claims of rationalism and natural philosophy, they would gut their theology and forfeit their title as Puritans. They never honestly met the philosophical difficulties of their Augustinian-Baconian position; but men who could believe simultaneously in predestination and Ramean logic would certainly have no trouble in assuming that, though God ordinarily permits nature to act by second causes, He can at any moment disrupt them for His own inscrutable purposes (15).

Preserving both beliefs would require a significant degree of compartmentalization along with an attendant patrolling of borders to prevent an untoward passage from one side to the other. There could be allowed no confusion of these distinctions. It is therefore no great leap to read into this situation an anxiousness of existential proportions, a level of self-scrutiny that, as Sacvan Bercovitch demonstrated in *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, was unprecedented.

Miller describes the covenant of the American Puritans as an ingenious attempt to overcome the difficulties that Baker describes above, yet one marked inexorably by a "fundamental distrust" (*Errand* 97). The Puritan finds himself attempting to describe and delineate the laws of Nature, to find what he may rely upon, while simultaneously pledging his faith to a fearsomely powerful and unknowable God who reserved the right to change those laws as He sees fit: "Most of the issues that were so hotly contested among seventeenth-century theologians were connected with attempts to resolve this discrepancy between the God of everyday providence and the God who dispensed His grace according to no rule but His own pleasure" (*New England Mind* 33). No easy task, and one only exasperated by the absolute demands being made on either end. For, as

Miller again and again points out, “It is of the essence of this theology that God, the force, the power, the life of the universe, remains to men hidden, unknowable, unpredictable. He is the ultimate secret, the awful mystery. God’s nature ‘is capable properly of no definition,’ so that all that one can say is that ‘God is an incomprehensible, first, and absolute Being.’ He cannot be approached directly; man cannot stand face to face with Him...” (*Errand* 51). This essence, Calvin’s ultimate challenge to the prevailing religious order and the driving force and heart of the Reformation by Miller’s estimation, does not provide an alternative relationship to the political and social structures of the day so much as it utterly destroys them in order to pave the way to an unadulterated (that is, purely spiritual) experience of grace. Delivered over to God, the Puritan returns to find a fallen material world stripped of all spiritual meaning.

Nature, in this Calvinist scheme, would then perhaps unexpectedly find resonance with the “icy” mechanical systems of cause and effect described by modern science, principally because it is based on similar distinctions. As Baker points out Calvinism’s austere distinction between God and creation can be seen as running parallel to Cartesian dualism: “Obsessed with the impious claim of man’s natural faculties for achieving a life of rational well-being, Calvin made the whole realm of nature the sink of corruption, alien from the realm of grace. Theologically, he fractured the medieval synthesis as sharply as Descartes would fracture it philosophically” (36). By vacating the material world of all spiritual value, Calvinism ironically enabled a dualism that would seek to delineate that world as a predictable mechanical system and thus, little by little, constrain God’s ability to surprise us. This was in fact the unavoidable outcome of the attempt to preserve God’s absolute sovereignty in the face of technological and scientific progress—God was further and further removed from the domain of material creation. In the

meantime the modern philosopher would take this ball and run with it into the end zone of the certainty of subjective intuition while the Puritan found him or herself unable to do so without a little (or a lot of) guilt about the matter.

Romanticism provided an alternative to this religious predicament by seeing the workings of the natural world in a manner decidedly different from its descriptions by modern science, hewing much closer to a description of nature as representing an irreducible plenitude. God would represent not the other to nature but the other *in* nature, nature's ultimate chaotic resistance to conceptual thought. For the American Puritans this choice carried special weight since, as Joan Richardson has observed, "A persistently disturbing element of this environment, observed repeatedly and variously by astute recorders of the American experiment, beginning with the diligent journal-keeping Puritans and running through to the poets of high modernism, was/is the incommensurability of nature, its unavailability to the categories of description embedded in the language of the settlers. Nature literally amazed them" (2). In other words, there is recourse to the concept of an *environment* in James's sense.

But again, and needless to say, this kind of irreducible complexity above and beyond language was anathema to those who tasked themselves with building an exemplary community in the wilderness of North America. In the hands of its leaders, "Calvinism could no longer remain the relatively simple dogmatism of its founder. It needed amplification, it required concise explication, syllogistic proof, intellectual as well as spiritual focus. It needed, in short, the one thing which, at bottom, it could not admit—a rationale" (*Errand* 53). The American Puritans found themselves wrestling with the unadulterated force of the Calvinist God—uncannily represented in physical terms by a severe and unforgiving wilderness awaiting Christian civilization and populated by

natives who alternately represented God's wrath or Satan's temptations. Nature, likewise, is both beyond any possible description and yet also the passive object of scientific scrutiny. How, then, to reconcile these extremes? Miller's seminal argument suggests that, from the beginning, the aim of the American Puritans was to reconcile the irreconcilable through a divine covenant. God would of his own free will abide by certain rules: "For all ordinary purposes He has transformed Himself in the covenant into a God vastly different from the inscrutable Divinity of pure Calvinism. He has become a God chained—by His own consent, it is true, but nevertheless a God restricted and circumscribed—a God who can be counted upon, a God who can be lived with. Man can always know where God is and what He intends" (*Errand* 63). Thus assured, the religious project of the "shining city on the hill" could continue unabated and unthreatened by the very same irresistible force that propelled it into being: "To describe this theology as 'rationalism' would be very much to overstate the case; before the triumph of Newtonian science reason did not have the rigid connotation it was later to carry...But in this way of thought appears an entering wedge of what must be called, if not rationalism, then reasonableness" (*Errand* 70).

One need not dwell long upon this bargain to determine something untenable in it. Inevitably, there seemed to be a missing piece in the foundation, an incompleteness or hole through which the irrational can always sneak back in, something lurking on the *outside*, waiting for its chance to upset the applecart of rational system building. As Miller notes, "the Puritan, as long as he remained a Puritan, could never banish entirely from his mind the sense of something mysterious and terrible, of something that leaped when least expected, something that upset all regularizations and defied all logic, something behind appearances that could not be tamed and brought to heel by men. The covenant thought kept this divine liberty at several removes, placed it on a theoretical plane,

robbed it of much of its terror, but it could not do away with it entirely” (*Errand* 94). This threat, this fundamental distrust, represents the crux of Miller’s argument, which is not so much about the Puritan suppression of the real force of Calvinism so much as their inability to do precisely that. An irreducible environment continually threatened the maintenance of closed systems, and it becomes clear that what Miller finds the Puritans attempting to do is a particularly dramatic example of the attempts of modern philosophy to secure an equation of the universe only to have it unbalanced by unexpected remainders, the frustration of fundamental incompleteness. Because of this, the Puritan mind is not synonymous with the Modern mind that attempts in Cartesian fashion to place a grid over all experience, to make the real into the ideal forms and figures of geometry. Instead, the Puritan recognizes that the remainder, that which passes just out of sight of the formal strictures of his descriptions, represents the very force and meaning of his entire project. The Puritan remains transfixed by what must necessarily escape the descriptions of his system, the “hidden God.”

Pragmatism in its Jamesian guise enacts these same dilemmas, but with an important and decisive difference. James shared with the Puritan a distrust of the foundational claims of the modern rational subject, but his suspicion comes from the opposite direction. As Schmidt notes, “The construction of an autonomous modern subject, at once certain of an authentic voice and ever afraid of falling to pieces, turned the noises of an eruptive divine world into dangerous signs of inward multiplicity” (179). James identifies this trend and runs counter to it by embracing and possessing the “inward multiplicity” of feeling as a means of preserving and purifying an interior space apart from foreign impositions. James turns Calvin inside out. The austere and inviolable distinction between material creation and a transcendent Creator re-enters itself as a

distinction between scientific determinism (the world as machine) and the remnants of an irreducible human element, an encounter with a face in the machine. In this fashion, the world assumes the characteristic determinisms of science, but the extraneous element transforms from God's sovereignty into man's through the control afforded by science. Thought transitions from a mediation between God and man (or man as constituted through the divine thought of God) to become a tool at man's disposal—in turn producing man as the *user* of tools. James puts the matter in decidedly suggestive theological terms: “The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything. Truth independent; truth that we *find* merely; truth no longer malleable to human need; truth incorrigible, in a word; such truth exists indeed superabundantly—or is supposed to exist by rationalistically minded thinkers; but then it means only the dead heart of the living tree, and its being there means only that truth also has its paleontology and its ‘prescription,’ and may grow stiff with years of veteran service and petrified in men's regard by sheer antiquity” (515). Faced with a vision of the universe as an immense and impersonal machine, James stakes a claim for the primacy of living feeling.

How did American thought arrive at this point? The irreducible environment represented by God's sovereignty has become an environment described as “sensational immediacy”—a movement that James claims “redeems the nature of reality from essential foreignness” (652). How did what is seemingly most *outside* become what is most intimate? How did it come to the critical distinction between *having* an experience and merely *thinking* about it? The roots of this narrative begin with the Puritans and their struggle with the contradictory demands of modernity, and it culminates in the early chapters of *A Pluralistic Universe* in which James rejects the “dualism and lack of intimacy”

(642) of Christian Theism for a “vision of God as the indwelling divine rather than the external creator, and of human life as part and parcel of that deep reality” (644).

James thus emphatically rejects the impersonal God of the Puritans. “The place of the divine in the world,” he writes, “must be more organic and intimate” (643). In common understandings of American thought, this claim has roots that reach as far back as the Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards. In an important 1940 essay entitled “From Edwards to Emerson,” Miller presents Edwards as the harbinger of a distinctly American mystical tradition that endeavors to experience God, as it were, “face to face.” As Miller writes, “What is persistent, from the covenant theology (and from the heretics against the covenant) to Edwards and to Emerson is the Puritan’s effort to confront, face to face, the image of a blinding divinity in the physical universe, and to look upon that universe without the intermediacy of ritual, of ceremony, of the Mass and the confessional” (*Errand* 185). This story, from Edwards to Ralph Waldo Emerson and beyond, forms the backbone of a particularly influential understanding of American thought, a humanist genealogy that culminates in the pragmatism of James and even, it will be argued, the neo-pragmatist revival initiated by Richard Rorty. At its core, or in its heart as Miller might say, it represents a striving to encounter God “face to face” (note the “impious” symmetry of that phrase) that reaches from Edwards and Emerson to Whitman and James, founding a familiar tradition of American individualism.

In a preface to “From Edwards to Emerson” written in 1956 for the publication of his collection *Errand Into the Wilderness*, Miller immediately blunts any easy comparisons between his subjects: “There can be no doubt that Jonathan Edwards would have abhorred from the bottom of his soul every proposition Ralph Waldo Emerson blandly

put forth in the manifesto of 1836, *Nature*” (*Errand* 184). Indeed, it would seem on the face of it difficult to see any progression from Edwards to Emerson at all. Miller continues,

Could he have lived long enough to witness the appearance in New England of “transcendentalism,” he would have beheld in it the logical and predictable collapse of the “liberal” theology which, in New England, became institutionalized as Unitarianism. If Edwards ever laughed, then he would have laughed—along with the other theologians of his party, few of whom were given to laughter—over the discomfiture of the Unitarians upon discovering a heresy in *their* midst, but I suspect he would have seen even more vividly than did the Princeton pundits the threat which the gentle Emerson raised against everything Edwards stood for. In that strictly historical regard, then, there is no organic evolution of ideas from Edwards to Emerson (*Errand* 184).

No *organic* evolution then, but Miller’s argument depends not so much on the content of their philosophies as their formal gestures. No identity of doctrinal belief or continuity of content but, to reach back to our beginning, a turn or orientation, a step outside into nature that begins an ineluctable progression inward: “The real difference between Edwards and Emerson, if they can thus be viewed as variants within their culture, lies not in the fact that Edwards was a Calvinist while Emerson rejected all systematic theologies, but in the quite other fact that Edwards went to nature, in all passionate love, convinced that man could receive from it impressions which he must then try to interpret, whereas Emerson went to Nature, no less in love with it, convinced that in man there is a spontaneous correlation with the received impressions” (*Errand* 185). Miller goes on to say that one might “define Emerson as an Edwards in whom the concept of original sin has evaporated...Edwards sought the ‘images or shadows of divine things’ in nature, but

could not trust his discoveries because he knew man to be cut off from full communion with the created order because of his inherent depravity. But Emerson, having decided that man is unfallen...announced that there is no inherent separation between the mind and the thing, that in reality they leap to embrace each other” (*Errand* 185).

Leaving aside for now the implicit suggestion of a continuity of Emerson’s early thought with his later (of which, if nothing else, one cannot claim the absence of an “inherent separation”), it would seem that Miller’s claim could be easily extended. Edwards inaugurates a turn towards nature in search of the shadow of the divine, a turn that becomes in Emerson, absent the foreign imposition of original sin, a direct experience of the divine *in* nature. Finally, James places paramount value on a direct and personal intimacy with experience, an insistence on the presence of an *environment* in the form of an immediate experience irreducible to the descriptive claims of conceptual thought. In this lineage, Edwards’s search for a divine environment beyond the natural becomes the discovery of the environment *in* nature, a space that resists the foreign impositions of science and philosophy and proclaims the sovereignty of a “sense of the heart.” Following the revisions of Emerson and then James, man claims possession of the environment as a defensive gesture, a turning away from inhuman or impersonal abstractions, thus carving out a space *apart* that Edwards, one presumes, would prefer to leave strictly to divine prerogative. That which is fundamentally *outside* is taken *inside*, tamed and appropriated as the interior space of a turn away from the inhuman and impersonal tide of scientific determinism.

This is a satisfying narrative principally because it presumes a fundamental identity concerning the progress of secularization in American thought in the centuries after Edwards, a familiar journey towards modern humanism and away from medieval

superstition and authority. It culminates in Richard Rorty's neo-pragmatism, a final rejection of the outside or absolute as a standard of value running concomitant with an explicit embrace of ethnocentrism. Joan Richardson's exceptional study *A Natural History of Pragmatism* (2007) is an ideal recent example of this narrative. Richardson defines the pragmatic tradition as "the realization of thinking as a life form, subject to the same processes of growth and change as all other life forms" (1). Much as in Miller's "face to face" encounters, this organic form of thinking depends on what Richardson calls an experience of the "aesthetic" involving recourse to "expressions of the feelings earlier embodied in purely religious forms, prayers, and rituals" (xi). Recalling James, Richardson imagines pragmatism as thought in relation to an environment, and her choice of subjects are distinguished in particular by what she says of Edwards, whose "faithful recording in linguistic forms mimetic of the conditions under which his perceptions developed provides invaluable documentation of a mind coming to know itself in a new relation to an environment" (13).

What is most compelling about Richardson's argument for the continuity of the tradition originally identified by Miller is the suggestion that it undergoes a change from religious to aesthetic experience, a process she characterizes as a naturalization: "...while the figures who are my subjects understood the role of the American writer to be a religious one, it was with a sense of religion naturalized and at the same time returned to its purest etymological meaning as 'binding together' – in this case, binding perception to the order of things" (11). It is possible to see Richardson's argument as a rehearsal of the progression of a certain idea of religious experience, from outer and literal to inner and private. James presents this distinction in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* as the distinction between received religious belief and that which issues from personal

experience. Speaking of a non-reflective religious type, he writes, “His religion has been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit. It would profit us little to study this second-hand religious life. We must make search rather for the original experiences which were the pattern-setters to all this mass of suggested feeling and imitated conduct. These experiences we can only find in individuals for whom religion exists not as a dull habit, but as an acute fever rather” (15). Religion as fever derives from what he calls “moments of sentimental and mystical experience...that carry an enormous sense of inner authority and illumination with them when they come” (23). For her part, Richardson draws this idea out to express a secularized notion of “grace understood as fact informed by feeling” (11).

In such heightened aesthetic moments, the recurrence of secularized, romanticized and organic transformations of religious feeling, Richardson observes the productive relationship of a life form negotiating its environment through a process of adaptation. As she puts it, “in America the combined threat of nature and the fragility of the body politic provided the *occasion* whereby propositions implicit in the Lockean theory of language became what Whitehead calls *lures for feeling*: in this setting, for feeling the anomic attendant on the breakdown of the old order of things...As Whitehead observes, it is the translation of the welter of emotional experience in the face of ‘stubborn fact’...into a private, self-conscious form that marks the aesthetic. In the case of the American experience, the imported theological framework inappropriately structures this aesthetic translation” (10). Here the emotional or aesthetic experience is irreducible to conceptual thought, or as she writes (quoting Emerson), “Words failed in ‘this new yet unapproachable America’” (2). For Richardson, it is this confrontation with an

irreducible environment that produces the thinking that would come to be expressed in pragmatism.

As in James, I want to suggest that Richardson also writes about the experience of a turning, the traversal of a border or limit. It is also yet another version of the “face to face” encounter: “The solutions these writers found to fill the anguished space, the expanding void opened by the gradual disappearance of God, were, in the most primary sense, aesthetic” (xi). In this secularized respect the aesthetic also performs the role of a resource or *capacity* of the subject. The experience evoked by Richardson, and indeed evoked by the texts she writes about, is the presentation of a binding wholeness that represents the limits of conceptual thought, but a limit taken within and appropriated, or indeed *represented* in the texts she examines. The environment, however briefly, is fully observable, the difference is healed and unity is presumed as a “binding together”—and this would seem to be the product of a capacity to experience and then express the primacy of feeling in contrast to the foreign abstractions of philosophy or even language itself. An identity between thought and feeling is expressed in the fleeting momentary experience of the aesthetic, what James calls the open air and possibilities of nature.

But it is also possible to see in this narrative a turning that rejects the foreignness and monstrosities of conceptual thought in the service of a construction of the self, a carving out of a space of interiority or negative freedom that may remain inviolable to the threat so vividly evoked by James’s image of a child drowning in a bathtub. Here what is distinctly human risks being overwhelmed by the rising waters like Pip in *Moby Dick*, shrunk to nothingness in the infinite expanse of the ocean, only to respond through the embrace of humanism as a kind of purification achieved in the distinction between thought and feeling. Most tellingly, Richardson excludes none other than Charles S.

Peirce from her study of pragmatism because his texts do not express or represent the capacity for feeling: “Peirce has not been chosen...because, while he certainly did describe throughout his writing the effects of Darwin’s theory on the process of thinking, on the refashioning of logic, on perceptual categories, his concern was not that his texts themselves serve as the corrective lenses through which this new universe of chance could be perceived” (15). Put another way, Richardson means that Peirce does not express or represent the relationship to an environment understood as feeling in his writing. In fact, Peirce quite pointedly excludes the expression of this relationship, and so the relationship to an environment remains unexpressed in the dry logicity of Peirce’s impersonal style of writing.

Seen in a broader context, the American evolution of humanism from Edwards to Emerson and James runs parallel to a similar story on the European continent. In a pair of illuminating studies, Michael Allen Gillespie traces the fate of the “nominalist God” that so terrorized pre-modern intellectuals, a God with the same essential characteristics that Miller identifies in the hidden God of the Puritans. As Gillespie argues, “This idea of God came to predominance in the fourteenth century and shattered the medieval synthesis of philosophy and theology, catapulting man into a new way of thinking and being, a *via moderna* essentially at odds with the *via antiqua*. This new way was in turn the foundation for modernity as the realm of human self-assertion” (*Nihilism* xiii). Modernity, in Gillespie’s reading, is achieved through the construction of a fortress of selfhood that acts as a defense against divine whims. This is similar to John O. Lyons argument that the modern “invention of the self” abandons the medieval understanding of “man as a mechanically finite entity” (79) and replaces it with a cult of personality and will, contributing to a “general movement of eighteenth century thought which makes God

beneficent and tends to identify Him with nature, and also believes that man can only know the world through his own experience” (184). Likewise, Gillespie writes,

It is the story of the way in which the late medieval conception of an omnipotent God inspired and informed a new conception of man and nature that gave precedence to will over reason and freedom over necessity and order...Scholasticism rested on the assumption that God and the cosmos are essentially rational. Nominalism argued that it contradicts God’s divinity to assume that he is subordinate to nature or reason. The intention of this critique was to reaffirm the importance of scripture, but its effect was to sever reason and revelation. It thus liberated natural science from the constraints of religion and opened the door for empiricism, but it also established an omnipotent divine will unrestrained by any rational notion of the good. The nominalist revolution thus fostered a growing doubt about the ground of science and morality in a cosmos ruled by a willful, transrational God. The rise of natural science is consequently concomitant with the rise of universal doubt. To secure himself and his science, man must build ramparts against divine caprice or malevolence. The first to raise such ramparts was Descartes (*Nihilism* xiii).

According to Gillespie, by identifying thinking with willing, Descartes initiated “the secularization of the idea of divine omnipotence” (*Nihilism* xxii). The famous foundation of modernity, “*ego cogito ergo sum*,” represents not an act of pure intellect but a seizure of the individual power to will: “To think, for Descartes, however, is ultimately to will. His fundamental principle is thus a self-confirming act of the will, made possible by the fact that this will, like that of God, is infinite” (xiv). Not being omnipotent, “man is thus free

only within the circle of his self thinking. Outside this bastion of reason, the chaos set loose by the possibility of a malicious God still reigns” (*Nihilism* xiv).

Gillespie traces in admirable detail the transformation of God’s sovereignty into man’s absolute will, from Descartes’ grounding of rationalism to German idealism and Romanticism and eventually Nietzsche’s will to power. In America a parallel development would pass from Edwards to the Emerson of “Self-Reliance” and then culminate with James, particularly his immensely influential essay of 1896, “The Will to Believe.” There James makes a foundational claim: “There is but one indefectibly certain truth, and that is the truth that pyrrhonic scepticism itself leaves standing—the truth that the present phenomenon of consciousness exists” (467). The great theme of the essay concerns man’s place in an impersonal cosmos, as James insists on the necessity of feeling as the excluded condition of scientific and philosophical thought: “Science can tell us what exists; but to compare the *worths*, both of what exists and of what does not exist, we must consult not science, but what Pascal calls our heart. Science herself consults her heart when she lay it down that the infinite ascertainment of fact and correction of false belief are the supreme goods for man” (472). The argument ends with a moral: “We ought...delicately and profoundly to respect one another’s mental freedom” (478). Each man, as James vividly and even movingly contends, retains the absolute freedom of his own inner kingdom, a form of personal sovereignty.

Pragmatism, I have argued so far, represents an intellectual reaction to the tidal wave of emerging control technologies as detailed in James Beniger’s important study *The Control Revolution*. Through the movement of a turning, one away from conceptual and abstract thought and towards the flux of an irreducible and immediate experience, it becomes possible to understand belief, our theoretical grasping of the world, as just so

many tools at our disposal: “No particular results then, so far, but only an attitude of orientation, is what the pragmatic method means” (510). James famously attributed his discovery of this method to his friend and fellow American philosopher Charles S. Peirce. As he writes in *Pragmatism*, the pragmatic principle “was first introduced into philosophy by Mr. Charles Peirce in 1878. In an article entitled ‘How to Make Our Ideas Clear,’ in the ‘Popular Science Monthly’ for January of that year Mr. Peirce, after pointing out that our beliefs are really rules for action, said that, to develop a thought’s meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance” (506). James takes Peirce’s maxim to be a declaration of freedom from our concepts, a freedom entailing among its consequences the notion that our theories are at *our* disposal, and not the other way around.

But here, exactly at this point of attribution, begins a divergence in this story that will reverberate both forwards to the development of cybernetics in America and backwards to Edwards and Emerson. Despite writing its founding documents, Peirce rejected pragmatism as understood by James. In its place he developed his own account, one deeply imbued with logical themes that James characteristically found beside the point. If pragmatism as popularized by James consists in a turning from thinking to feeling, then Peirce turns in the opposite direction. Peirce turns towards concepts and abstractions, towards generals and away from the particular and individual. His philosophy dramatizes a *becoming technological* of the immediate flux, a movement also expressed by what David Wills describes as a prosthesis: “a displacement of original plenitude into the kinetics of working parts” (*Prosthesis* 33). If James sought the reinstatement of the vague, Peirce sought its greater determination: “Pragmatism is the principle that every theoretical judgment expressible in a sentence in the indicative mood

is a confused form of thought whose only meaning, if it has any, lies in its tendency to enforce a corresponding practical maxim expressible as a conditional sentence with its apodosis in the imperative mood” (*Pragmatism* 110). This movement from the indicative to the imperative, from statements about being to statements about what shall be done, suggests the sense in which Peirce’s semiotics is concerned with signs as partial *determinations* of the indeterminate. The plane of immanence evoked by James as a space apart from the technological or mechanical workings of the world is broken up and differentiated into the gears and levers of a semiotic system. The following section will explore this turn by comparing Peirce’s understanding of “reality” to the contemporary anti-representational and ethnocentric pragmatism of Richard Rorty which draws its principal inspiration from James. If James and Peirce are both pragmatists, they face in opposite directions.

Towards Systems: Pragmatism After Humanism

Without this *non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*, without that which secretly unhinges it, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who *are not there*, of those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*, what sense would there be to ask the question “where?” “where tomorrow?” “whither?”

—Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (xviii)

Even at the beginning, as far back as Peirce and James, there seemed to be two distinct pragmatist traditions, as if from the start pragmatism was denied an identity even with itself. In a recent example, H.O. Mounce announces, “The development of Pragmatism from Peirce to Rorty exhibits a movement between two sets of ideas which are directly opposed to each other. The former may be taken as a paradigm of Realism;

the latter of Anti-Realism. The two have nothing in common except that they are called by the same name” (229). As is well known, Richard Rorty pointedly excludes Peirce, the putative inventor of pragmatism, from his own tradition, because, as John Patrick Diggins notes, “Peirce...continued to believe in the eventual possibility of reaching truth” (12). Nevertheless, it is also true that Peirce, as Diggins himself notes, resists easy categorization: “[Peirce] often vacillated between idealism and realism, between the belief that objects are internal to the mind and that they exist independent of consciousness” (165). But these terms, idealism and realism, draw the very distinction that Peirce’s pragmatism is designed to overcome, and observations of the essentially dual character of his thought show that Peirce is perhaps not so easily placed on one side or the other.

Both realism and idealism presume a mind which may achieve either a representational relationship with reality or a coherent relationship with itself. Put another way, knowledge must either derive from the subject or the object. For both, an inviolate distinction between mind and reality remains intact, a distinction that Peirce repeatedly made clear that he intended to do away with entirely: “Modern philosophy has never been able quite to shake off the Cartesian idea of the mind...everybody continues to think of mind in this same general way, as something within this person or that, belonging to him and correlative to the real world” (EP2 199). Peirce believed, by contrast, that mind is not the special property of an individual, but a general characteristic of the universe as a whole, something in fact not in anyone’s possession at all. As he wrote in a letter to William James, “Thought is more without us than within. It is we that are in it, rather than it in any of us” (CP 8.189). Or in another important passage:

...there is no element whatever of man's consciousness which has not something corresponding to it in the word; and the reason is obvious. It is that the word or sign which man uses *is* the man himself. For, as the fact that every thought is a sign, taken in conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thought, proves that man is a sign; so, that every thought is an *external* sign, proves that man is an external sign. This is to say, the man and the external sign are identical... Thus my language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought" (EP1 54).

Already it is clear that Peirce imposes on James's fortress by reducing "man" to the sum total of impersonal language, and so man cannot retreat "inside" because he is already, in some sense, "outside." This is a condition often elided by modern philosophies because man "persists in identifying himself with his will" (EP1 54). Peirce runs against the modern valorization of individual human will identified by Gillespie and exemplified by James, and because of this his notion of reality repeats in a formal sense the Puritan dilemmas described by Miller as means for coping with the "hidden God" of Calvinism. Peirce's pragmatism insists on the determination of the indeterminate, but it also simultaneously insists on a remainder that eludes any ultimate determination. Feeling remains *outside* and unavailable as the condition of semiotic meaning and communication—it is always already *becoming* mechanical or technological.

Given that both sides of the argument outlined by Mounce often repeat the very error Peirce complains about (in subtle or unsubtle ways) it remains to be seen what Peirce can contribute to a *posthumanist* reading of pragmatism; or conversely, in what sense the pragmatist turn away from Peirce simultaneously founds a humanism that can no longer be sustained. The turn away from Peirce inaugurates a turn towards self-presence, towards a reality and grounding of feeling, and so his thought represents the

encroachment of a foreign, technological, inauthentic, theoretical, or material *other* that must be resisted in the formation of the humanist subject.

It is appropriate then that the birth of pragmatism in America was the establishment of a split within itself. Christened by James but disowned by its supposed father, pragmatism finds itself from the beginning to be the product of a division within and against itself. It was a word, as Louis Menand notes, no one wanted to claim:

It is a minor peculiarity...that none of the principal figures who became identified with pragmatism much liked the name. James used it only because it was the term he remembered Peirce coining back in their Metaphysical Club days; he would have preferred “humanism”...Peirce himself, who had never used the word in print until James’s lecture, saw the chance he had been given to repackage his views with a label publicized by a celebrity; but he soon realized that the resemblance between his own thought and what James and Dewey were doing was not deep...(351).

In response, Peirce would coin “pragmaticism”—a term he claimed was “ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers” (EP2 335). Posterity has proven him right in that assessment, but the word retains some fascination for imposing a certain ugliness on its parent: pragmat(ic)ism. It certainly does not roll off the tongue. It interrupts the ease of expression by involving a kind of stutter or intrusive foreignness. Even here, from the very moment of its inception, pragmatism’s attention to the personal, the singular, and the individual is disrupted from within by a hiccup or interruption, a changing of tracks or reversal that inaugurates the reign of the impersonal, foreign, prosthetic, mechanical, or technological.

This hiccup also represents Peirce's difference with Richard Rorty's neo-pragmatism which draws its inspiration from James and Dewey. There is thus a clear distinction to be drawn between Rorty's embrace of the full consequences of thought's embeddedness in the myriad determinative contexts in which it arises, and Peirce's perhaps quixotic quest to provide a logical "proof" for his own pragmatism. This is, again, a question of inside and outside—but one not so easily solved by choosing one side or the other. For Rorty, "Peirce himself remained the most Kantian of thinkers—the most convinced that philosophy gave us an all-embracing ahistorical context in which every other species of discourse could be assigned its proper place and rank" (*Consequences* 161). Rorty's Peirce, in other words, remained committed to a form of philosophy that seeks self-transcendence, a leaping out of the world—a commitment that belies the instrumentalist formulations of his early pragmatism in essays such as "How to Make Our Ideas Clear." In this view, Peirce violates what could be called the Rortyan maxim: "It is impossible to attempt to step outside our skins—the traditions, linguistic and other, within which we do our thinking and self-criticism—and compare ourselves with something absolute" (*Consequences* xix). But if we take this form of pragmatism seriously (and we should) then what remains is not simply a turn to the inside but a returning or turning back to theory, a "third way" that negotiates the foundational instability of *both* inside and outside.

Rorty seeks a pragmatism that can surpass representationalism or the hope for a truth beyond time and culture and seeks accomplish this by foregrounding interpretative communities rather than individuals. But for Rorty such communities are the end of the line, enforcing by necessity a kind of "ethnocentrism"—there is no access to the "outside" of a particular community's beliefs, no standard of evaluation beyond one's communal

preferences. As Rorty writes, “If one reinterprets objectivity as intersubjectivity, or as solidarity...then one will drop the question of how to get in touch with ‘mind-independent and language-independent reality.’ One will replace it with questions like ‘What are the limits of our community?’” (*Objectivity* 13). The question of “limits” is particularly important, since Rorty’s concept of solidarity seems to task itself with the drawing of those limits, with the erasure or expulsion of that which is alien or other. This means that there are definite limits, as Rorty made well known in his dismissals of thought he deemed beyond the pale of Western democratic liberalism, to who may gain membership to the social “us” from which values and beliefs are derived. For Peirce, by contrast, communities are by definition “indefinite” and “unlimited” and must always renegotiate their borders as permeable contacts with a reality that is forever deferred. Communities, in other words, can never answer the question of limits, since for Peirce “our” community is never whole, never singular, and thus “solidarity” remains out of reach, and nothing remains permanently excluded. From Rorty’s perspective, Peirce’s philosophy represents a nostalgia for an “outside” that is inaccessible.

Rorty’s philosophy is then ultimately most instructive as the acceptance and exploration of circularity, a valiant commitment to create value not from outside but entirely from within, resulting in an embrace of ethnocentrism as the only non-metaphysical way forward. Rorty cannot claim to have an objective or foundational argument for adopting this approach, and so his work is often most intriguing at circular moments of tension or decision. When faced with an either/or but deprived of any objective criteria for decision, Rorty finds himself stranded over an abyss much in the manner of Buridan’s ass—as hungry as he is thirsty. Near the end of *Consequences of*

Pragmatism, there is a moment that in its candor provides one of the clearest examples of this approach:

Pragmatists follow Hegel in saying that “philosophy is its time grasped in thought.” Anti-pragmatists follow Plato in striving for an escape from conversation to something atemporal which lies in the background of all possible conversations. I do not think one can decide between Hegel and Plato save by meditating on the past efforts of the philosophical tradition to escape from time and history. One can see these efforts as worthwhile, getting better, worth continuing. Or one can see them as doomed and perverse. I do not know what would count as a noncircular metaphysical or epistemological or semantical argument for seeing them in either way. So I think that the decision has to be made simply by reading the history of philosophy and drawing a moral...Nothing that I have said, therefore, is an argument in favor of pragmatism (174).

This moment is telling because Rorty draws an important distinction but cannot find any objective argument for choosing one side over the other. He chooses nevertheless—a moment that recalls a Jamesian act of will—and finds the grounds for his decision within the cultural values and beliefs of his community. And having chosen, he rightly sacrifices any ability to justify his choice in terms of an objective or metaphysical reality. As he puts it elsewhere, “the pragmatist cannot justify these habits without circularity, but then neither can the realist” (*Objectivity* 29). This is a crucial point, but it also means that moments of decision have a familiar existential tenor. Confronted with an abyss of circularity in the form of an undecidable, Rorty’s finds the wherewithal to make a decision through a retreat back to the resources of the historical, cultural, and situational circumstances he finds himself in, a turn away from the universalist pretensions of

“theory” that in effect erases the difference made by the fact of his decision and pushes epistemological or ontological questions out of view as irrelevant.

Rorty’s line in the sand leads Tom Cohen to persuasively argue that neo-pragmatism evades its *own* tradition, “the very materiality (of language, of the sign) that *it* has implied from the start” (89). Cohen’s term “materiality” carries a heavy semantic burden as an all-encompassing term for a confluence of forces that neo-pragmatism designates as foreign, alien, or other: “At stake, in short, is whether the critical politics mobilizing neo-pragmatism against ‘theory’ entails a misreading of its own pedigree, a fairly mystified attempt to return to a space of the subject or self that pragmatism was implicitly designed to empty or exceed, and hence, whether what it ends by evading is not, in a sense, America itself” (90). Here materiality stands for what Cohen calls “the *thing*” as that which is masked, evaded, or transcended by the humanist maneuver in neo-pragmatism. It might just as well be identified by what Theodor Adorno calls the “preponderance of the object” or “thingness” resisted in the affirmation of the bourgeois subject’s freedom (189).

Whether intentionally or not, Cohen suggestively identifies America itself with the *thing*—as if America itself somehow threatens the protected interiority of the humanist subject. If the project of neo-pragmatism represents an evasion in the service of a “theology of the self,” then what’s being evaded is, remarkably, *America*. Cohen turns the tables on Rorty by suggesting that his recovery of pragmatism in the name of American nationalism is itself an evasion of pragmatism, and the deployment of this nationalism operates as what Cohen describes as a stark division between *us* and *them*: “here it is the American way that forms a certain *us* (the human), while the binarized other—alien, unhuman, theoretical—forms a *them*” (93). When neo-pragmatism turns “against theory”

toward the “pragmatic, situationist, individualist, historical, interventionist” (90) it also turns away from the *thing*, from materiality as such, from America itself and from America as *them*.

The problem with neo-pragmatism, in short, is that it is a theory that refuses to account for itself as a *theory*. It pretends to transcend its own *thing*-ness or foreignness, and so it locates itself within a space of interiority. For Rorty, since the pragmatist is “a partisan of solidarity, his account of the value of cooperative human inquiry has only an ethical base, not an epistemological or metaphysical one” (*Objectivity* 24). But isn’t there an epistemology anyway, a blind one constituted by that very refusal of epistemology? There is a kind of purity at stake here, an authenticity of voice or presence that rejects the imposed abstractions of theory as totalitarian and inhuman. Cohen continues, “is it clear just how classically this ideology of neo-pragmatism is constructed: locate an outside...and reject it as alien, though what is being ejected, the pragma or evil ‘thing,’ materiality as such, in fact lies behind one’s own (American) pragmatism (in Poe, in Emerson, in Peirce, and so on); then refashion what is called ‘our’ pragmatism itself as that which, having ejected the alien or unhuman figures, can be restituted as a legitimized morality of the integral human subject and a seamless model for action to boot” (98). A simple turn back to theory, however, would represent an evasion of the very specificity and individuality that neo-pragmatism wants to privilege. Cohen’s response to this dilemma is an emphasis on a kind of machinal repetition:

The renowned but often banally translated “Man is the measure...” could more interestingly be tracked, perhaps, if we did not assume “Man” as the given narcissistic subject, but reflected “him” back into the parameters of “measure” itself. Such a text might no longer be called simply relativist *or* humanist, since it

also constitutes a defacement of “man.” “Measure” could now be rendered by a series, not of letters but of marks, knocks, or bars that are almost possible to render graphically (/ / / /). Precisely such a bar series can become the emblem not only of repetition and narrative, but of castration, materiality, anteriority, allegory, exteriority, semiotic “death,” listing, the machinal, and the generative point of linguistic consciousness as such (103).

If, as Cohen suggests, we turn back to the origins of American pragmatism in search of this graphic repetition or machine, then we return to Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson, but most decisively we return to Peirce, to his “Existential Graphs,” his semiotics, and finally, quite to the horror of any good neo-pragmatist, his realism. Not the classically metaphysical realism that proposes that the mind may represent the world as it is in itself within the space of a reflective transcendental consciousness, but instead an insistence upon the *thing*, the materiality as such that is evaded in neo-pragmatism and is built into this realism in the form of self-limitation, an acknowledgment of the real as the other side of a constitutive difference. This is the real as alterity, the real as *them* re-entering into *us*, a *becoming* technological or prosthetic—the real, finally, as an infinitely deferred community.

By contrast, Rorty’s vision of community and solidarity is not deferred but all-consuming, *already* achieved, thus transforming questions of ontology and epistemology into questions of ethics and politics: “for now one is debating what purposes are worth bothering to fulfill, which are more worthwhile than others, rather than which purposes the nature of humanity or of reality obliges us to have. For antiessentialists, all possible purposes compete with one another on equal terms, since none are more ‘essentially human’ than others” (*Objectivity* 110). All well and good, but as Cary Wolfe remarks on

this passage, “But here, precisely at this juncture, the radically pluralist imperative of Rorty’s pragmatist commitment to contingency begins to break down—or more specifically, begins to be recontained by a more familiar, more complacent and uncritical sort of pluralism” (*Observing* 251). That sort of pluralism being, of course, the familiar liberal humanism of the West shorn of one of its more definitive characteristics: the quest for a Platonic fixture for knowledge above the endless conversation, a “God’s eye view” as Rorty often calls it. If the advance of liberal humanism produced a Peirce and Kant in the first place, then for Rorty those very same prerogatives demand that we distance ourselves from foundational gestures and system making philosophies. It is precisely within the tradition of Western liberal humanism, in the values of pluralism and democracy (values that, one might point out, derive from the “Kantian” tradition Rorty wants to abandon), that we find the resources to resist these systematic (inhuman, foreign) philosophies.

Rorty admits the one-sidedness of his embrace of the Enlightenment in his attempt to “peel apart Enlightenment liberalism from Enlightenment rationalism” (“Justice” 147). But it is just this abandonment of “Enlightenment rationalism” that leads Rorty into trouble, not because it leads to relativism, but quite the opposite: because it grounds itself in *itself*. Ultimately, this self-grounding move is hard to distinguish from the very tradition of rationalism since Descartes that Rorty wants to abandon—in which the Rortyan “us” is equally singular, whole, and self-sustaining. In this manner, Rorty’s pragmatism performs the very same self-grounding of values that it is designed to question. The difference lies in the abandonment of any outside (rational, metaphysical, inhuman, theoretical) justification for that grounding beyond the preferences and beliefs that derive from communal solidarity.

In this way, Rorty reconstructs a self-present or immanent social discourse by papering over the difference that creates it (erasing in effect the *them* that gives form and meaning to *us*) and exposing itself most directly in a valorization of liberal political values at the expense of real social inequality. As Wolfe puts it, "...when Rorty claims that 'we' should encourage the 'end of ideology' (*Objectivity* 64), that 'anti-ideological liberalism is, in my view, the most valuable tradition of American intellectual life' (*Objectivity* 64), Rorty is staging a claim that is itself ideological through and through...What Rorty does not recognize, in other words, is that there is a fundamental contradiction between his putative desire to extend liberal advantages to an even larger community, and the fact that those advantages are possible for some only because they are purchased at the expense of others" (*Observing* 252). This critique locates a blindness in Rorty's political and ethical vision, one that bears directly on his reading of Peirce's supposed containment of contingency within a realist epistemology: "In following the pragmatic tradition and treating knowledge as what comes to be validated by conventional methods of validation (and interpretation), Rorty overlooks the poststructuralist point that what comes to be accepted is at the expense of what has been excluded" (Diggins 457). Rorty's pragmatism excludes but cannot recognize *that* it excludes, let alone what. It is this refusal of epistemology in the service of the protection of a self-grounding interiority or ethnocentrism that means that it cannot simultaneously recognize (or refuses to recognize) its *own* contingency.

Diggins arrives at a similar point: "Pragmatism advises us to try whatever promises to work and proves to be useful as the mind adjusts to the exigencies of events. Does pragmatism itself work?" (3). Can a pragmatist even ask this? After all, as Rorty notes, it is impossible (always? everywhere?) to leap out of our own skins, but isn't that

statement embedded too? Rorty would undoubtedly answer yes, but what does it mean that we can make this quasi-transcendental point about contingency? Doesn't marking out a space of interiority from which one cannot escape or transcend also mark an outside as well? Not the outside itself, but the repetition of a difference, a circular limit or aporetic boundary that continually returns us anew to the wholeness of an inside that is paradoxically founded on difference; an inside that is forever elusive as if in a repeated series of bars or marks (or circles) which represent the sense in which the situational, specific, or individual is *already* marked by the general, foreign, or theoretical. As if our own limbs did not belong to us, as if consciousness itself, seemingly the inviolate space of interiority, was from the beginning a prosthesis or technology? How is it that our communal *us* always seems, just out of the corner of its eye, to reference a *them*?

In the face of these dilemmas both Cohen and Wolfe find a return to epistemological questions to be vital. As Wolfe proclaims, "We must steer a third way, I believe, and pursue pragmatism *on the site of theory*, one whose price is not the politically disabling repression of theory that has proved so tempting for pragmatism when its commitment to contingency becomes inconvenient" (*Critical* 21). In turn, I think that those looking for both pragmatism and epistemology must turn back to Peirce, whose semiotics and realism are built to acknowledge the exclusions that Rorty's pragmatism can only leave behind. Peirce attempts, in other words, to include the excluded middle between Rortyan pragmatism and "theory" by understanding the individual as excluded from any general system of meaning, and that this exclusion is the generative condition of semiosis and the source of its infinite deferrals. One may draw a circle around an "inside" but only through the simultaneous (and continuous) reference to an "outside"—and thus the inside loses stability and becomes contingent and elusive, only available through the

repetition of its constitutive difference. In this way, Peirce's pragmatism dramatizes the intrusion of materiality, the very overtaking of the voice or self by the machine of meaning that James and Rorty portray as the foreign abstractions of metaphysical philosophy, as *them*.

Peirce emphatically insists on realism. To what end? If it were a realism that seeks a guiding transcendental principle outside itself then Peirce would indeed be disqualified from any pragmatism that seeks to avoid foundationalism or representationalism. But it may be argued that Peirce avoids these traps by grounding his realism in a conception of signs as partial determinations of an infinitely indeterminate reality. Signs can then profitably be understood as *distinctions* between a determinate actuality and an infinitely indeterminate realm of possibility—the simultaneous presentation of *both* actuality and possibility by means of a distinction, and so every actual determination automatically refers to infinitely further potential determinations. This is how Peirce can argue that truth is by definition *incomplete*: “Truth is that concordance of an abstract statement with the ideal limit towards which endless investigation would tend to bring scientific belief, which concordance the abstract statement may possess by virtue of the confession of its inaccuracy and one-sidedness, and this confession is an essential ingredient of truth” (EP2 395). Peirce does not place the incompleteness of truth at the feet of its inability to incorporate individual or personal feeling. Instead, this idea of truth avoids any recourse to the Jamesian turn and thus engages in something altogether more abstract, more impersonal.

The meaning or truth-value of a sign is “one-sided” and in this manner it instigates a reversal or vacillation that resembles the stabilizing mechanisms of negative feedback loops. Floyd Merrell's vital *Peirce, Signs, and Meaning* provides an apt description

of this process: “What is *overdetermined* (the field of all possibilities), cannot but become, after account has been rendered regarding that which was actualized from the possible, *undetermined*, and hence there will always be something left unknown” (143). This is the critical difference with Rorty, whose concept of belief cannot acknowledge the difference, the occlusion of other possibilities, that makes its own “solidarity” possible. As Wolfe puts it, for Rorty, “the ‘outside’ of belief or description...is always already *inside*” (*Critical* 15). Peirce turns these distinctions inside out, and so they take on the character of what David Wills has analyzed as “a chiasmatic or *converse* relation, something like a directional interchangeability or interchangeable directionality between what we might traditionally call constituent elements” (*Dorsality* 26). Peirce’s “vacillations” between realism and idealism are then not inconsistencies but the result of seeing any belief or description as necessarily limited or partial and therefore subject to further, infinitely further, determinations. The is a relationship that may then be characterized by a phrase from Francisco Varela and Rudolph Glanville, itself a kind of Möbius strip, “the inside of one is the outside of the other, and vice versa” (640).

Peirce himself understood the terms of these debates in the decidedly old-fashioned terms of nominalism and realism.¹ When James claims, “Empiricism lays the explanatory stress upon the part, the element, the individual, and treats the whole as a collection and the universal as an abstraction” (1160) it can be read as the polar opposite to Peirce because his semiotic realism places emphasis on generals as *real* and not simply abstractions from individual parts. Generals are signs, and as such are understood as the

¹ See James Hoopes, *Community Denied: The Wrong Turn of Pragmatic Liberalism* for a short introduction to this debate in American philosophy. See John Deely’s *The Four Ages of Understanding* for an exhaustive account of the nominalism debate in the history of philosophy and the intervention of semiotics.

difference between a determinate part and an indeterminate whole.² This inaugurates a semiotics that can lead us to a concept of language as what David Wills has called a “high technology or technology of information” (*Dorsality* 15) because reflective human consciousness is replaced with abstract information processing, a technology of signs negotiating a relationship with an invisible and unrepresentable outside as the noise or chaos irreducible to communication but which also acts as the ground of its possibility, an *environment* from which information and communication must be distinguished in order to be meaningful.

As I have insisted, Peirce’s sense of the sign is to be understood as both determinate and indeterminate, a simultaneous presentation of both actuality and possibility. The sign, in other words, names the *distinction* as a unity but not an identity, a chiasmic relationship between constitutive elements, meaning that the determination of either side instigates a reversal over into the other. Because of this, the moment of expression entails a continual foreclosure of the foundational interior space from which the expression supposedly issues. Peirce declared, “My pragmatism, having nothing to do with qualities of feeling” instead represents the argument that “concepts... essentially carry some implication concerning the general behavior either of some conscious being or of some inanimate object, and so convey more, not merely than any feeling, but more, too, than any existential fact, namely, the ‘*would-acts*’ of habitual behavior; and no agglomeration of actual happenings can ever completely fill up the meaning of a ‘would be.’” (EP2 402). Peirce’s language is characteristically difficult, showing all by itself the intrusion of a foreign or inhuman other, but his essential point draws a sharp distinction

² Kauffman, L. H. “The Mathematics of Charles Sanders Peirce.” *Cybernetics & Human Knowing*, 8 1.2 (2001): 79–110.

between intellectual concepts and the ground of their emergence. The individual, the event, the voice—all are overtaken or exceeded by the machinery of semiosis.

To avoid ethnocentrism, Peirce needs a concept of reality that does not pretend to transcend its own contingency. If Rorty tames contingency within a familiar liberal humanism, creating a homogenous social *us* in the process that cannot contain the pluralism it explicitly advocates, then Rorty's philosophy cannot observe the non-identity of the social space it professes to describe. It remains blind to its own exclusions. Peirce's realism avoids this fate only by refusing to claim reality for any specific individual, sociality, or discourse:

That is *real* which has such and such characters, whether anybody thinks it to have those characters or not...thought, controlled by a rational experimental logic, tends to the fixation of certain opinions, equally destined, the nature of which will be the same in the end, however the perversity of thought of whole generations may cause the postponement of the ultimate fixation. If this be so, as every man of us virtually assumes that it is, in regard to each matter the truth of which he seriously discusses, then, according to the adopted definition of 'real,' the state of things which will be believed in that ultimate opinion is real (EP2 343).

Peirce carefully stresses that the character of the real is that which has particular qualities independent of any particular mind. A traditional or intuitive idea of realism would simply state that it is the belief that the human mind is capable of grasping the world as it is in itself. There is no such assumption in Peirce's formulation. As Susan Haack writes, "Is truth, in Peirce's conception, mind-independent? Yes and no. Yes: what is true does not depend on what you, or I, anyone *thinks* is true. No: there could be no truth in principle unknowable by us" (415). There is no particular human mind in which the

world can appear as it is in itself, nor is there a world as it is in itself since the real is not independent of the “ultimate opinion” which, after all, cannot be the opinion of any particular person or group of people—a group being just as “individual” as a single person. Peirce’s reality, in other words, cannot be thought in a single idea, mind, or community.

At this point notions of *us* and *them* take on a distinct importance because reality would seem to evade being in the possession of either. That is, reality is not in the possession of any unique or particular individual or class, since “individualism and falsity are one and the same” (CP 5.402n2). Nor is reality some noumenal object that in principal cannot be known, since Peirce clearly identifies it with the “ultimate opinion.” This can be untangled through understanding reality as the unity of a distinction, particularly a distinction between *us* (the body of knowledge present in a community) and *them* (potential future knowledge, the unknown). In other words, any particular *us* operates by means of exclusion or suppression of *them*, but Peirce’s concept of reality serves to paradoxically unite these terms as a reference towards what Emerson called “onwardness” and Peirce refers to as the sense in which “The rational meaning of every proposition lies in the future” (EP2 340). The alterity represented by *them* continually re-enters into *us* in the form of indeterminacy—the *us* is always already becoming *them*, continually requiring a shifting of borders or lines of demarcation.

Peirce’s conception of reality has certain similarities to what cyberneticist Norbert Wiener refers to as an Augustinian belief in the world’s *incompleteness*: “an element of incomplete determinism, almost an irrationality in the world” (11). Moreover, as Larry Holmes has pointed out, Peirce’s philosophy displaces the subject as the seat of rationality

with a quasi-machinelike understanding of the self.³ These points raise the specter of the cybernetic machine, a paradigm of feedback loops and information processing in place of the humanist subject. Peircean semiotics describes the imposition of a *thing* in the place of an autonomous self, an overtaking of the event of consciousness by the machine of semiotics—man is the sum total of his language. Cohen’s series of bars or marks is represented in the machinal operations of this semiotics just as Peirce represented them in his “Existential Graphs,” starkly imagining what Anne Freidman calls a semiosis without a subject.⁴

On the terrain of the machinal Peirce’s philosophy also intersects with Jacques Derrida’s figure of the event-machine, a joining together of the event (singular, individual, non-repeatable) and machine (general, inhuman, iterative): “The new figure of an event-machine would no longer be even a figure. It would not resemble, it would resemble nothing, not even what we call, in a still familiar way, a monster. But it would therefore be, by virtue of this very novelty, an event, the only and the first possible event, because im-possible That is why I ventured to say that this thinking could belong only to the future—and even that it makes the future possible” (*Without* 73). Impossible because thinking the event and machine *at once* requires seeing two sides of a distinction at the same time, which can only inaugurate what Floyd Merrell calls the “uncertain, vacillating scandal of meaning” (vii). This oscillation kicks us from one side to the other, on into the future: “meaning is not in the signs, the things, or the head; it is in the processual rush of *semiosis*; it is always already on the go toward somewhere and somewhen” (xi). So perhaps what Derrida calls the event-machine also takes on the character of the “messianic” as

³ Holmes, Larry. “Peirce on Self- Control.” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 2.2 (1966): 113-130.

⁴ Freidman, Anne. *The Machinery of Talk: Charles Peirce and the Sign Hypothesis*. 1st ed. Stanford University Press, 2004.

described in *Specters of Marx*, an expectation of arrival, not the arrival *per se* but the expectation of arrival built into the present, every present as an expectation of the future, what he calls the “irreducibility of affirmation” (112) or “a certain experience of the emancipatory promise; it is perhaps even the formality of a structural messianism, a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism” (74).

Peirce’s own attempt to corral this monstrous and messianic event-machine is represented in his semiotics—an unsightly slouching beast if there ever was one. His understanding of reality as an expectation or an event to come, of meaning as an approaching yet unapproachable horizon, may be reconciled to the vision of America evoked by Cohen. America as *them*, as those not (yet) present, as event-machine: “To think *both* the machine *and* the performative event together remains a monstrosity to come, an *impossible* event. Therefore the only possible event. But it would be an event that, this time, would no longer happen without the machine. Rather it would happen by the machine” (*Without* 74). America as a general sign: an (im)possible event, hosting the irruption from within itself of a parasitical foreign *other*. Peirce writes, “Thus, the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of an indefinite increase of knowledge” (EP1 52). Reality as community (as America) understood as forward motion, as *them* becoming *us*—though there will never finally be *us* since the concept makes no sense, has no meaning, without *them*.

Which brings us back to the beginning: Cohen’s suggestive identification of the *thing*, of materiality as such, the machine of semiosis or an encroaching foreign *them*, with America. Far from Rorty’s policing of boundaries, Peirce insists on their permeability. Far from a vision of an American ethnocentrism couched in the familiar terms of Western

liberal democracy, Peirce envisions an America without limits, indefinite, machinal, encroaching, foreign, *post*-human: “Individual action is a means and not our end. Individual pleasure is not our end; we are all putting our shoulders to the wheel for an end that none of us can catch more than a glimpse at—that which the generations are working out” (CP 5.402 n2). I cannot help but imagine that Rorty must have found this imagery alarming. Putting our shoulders to the wheel of what? A great machine? As if America is this machine, this post-human *thing*—an engine that pulls into the future and away from the presence of the situational and individual? America as a hope or futurity, or—with Emerson this time—an expectation: “Bear with these distractions, with this coetaneous growth of the parts: they will one day be *members*, and obey one will. On that one will, on that secret cause, they nail our attention and hope. Life is hereby melted into an expectation or a religion... And what a future it opens! I feel a new heart beating with the love of the new beauty. I am ready to die out of nature, and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West” (*Prose* 207-208). Peirce cannot match Emerson’s gift of expression, but his vision of community remains just as compelling: “This infinite hope which we all have...is something so august and momentous, that all reasoning in reference to it is a trifling impertinence...So this sentiment is rigidly demanded by logic. If its object were any determinate fact, any private interest, it might conflict with the results of knowledge and so with itself; but when its object is of a nature as wide as the community can turn out to be, it is always a hypothesis uncontradicted by facts and justified by its indispensableness for making any action rational” (EP1 82). This raises the possibility that we are not, contra James, drowned in a bathtub of our own making. We die out of nature. We are swept up, dispersed in the machine of meaning. It is not in us, we are in it.

Chapter Two

The “Double Consciousness” of Emerson and Peirce: Second-Order Observation in American Thought

“If I don’t see I am blind, I am blind; but if I see I am blind, I see.”
—Heinz von Foerster, *Understanding Understanding* (213).

In 1903 Peirce presented a lecture series at Harvard which resulted in one of the more comprehensive descriptions of his mature philosophy. In the third lecture, “The Categories Defended,” Peirce undertakes the task of describing his categories: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. Given the often vague or analogous modes of description used to invoke them and their role in Peirce’s semiotics, it is no wonder that they are often the subject of considerable confusion. Indeed, as Anthony Wilden claims, “I have never met or heard of anyone who understood Peirce’s theory of signs” (268). Such statements, though amusing to anyone who has ever attempted to come to terms with Peirce, are symptomatic of the great difficulty attending a clear understanding of his thought, a difficulty not without warrant often laid at the feet of the Peirce himself. Nevertheless, it is precisely the issue of intelligibility or clearness (one might say the clearness, or lack thereof, of our ideas) that is in fact at stake in the category of Thirdness, a category for symbols, laws, and growth that encompasses and exceeds both Firsts (icons, feeling, possibilities, chaos, chance) and Seconds (indexes, facts, reaction, struggle). Given the materialist and determinist trends of his day, Peirce’s idea of Thirdness probably seemed curious at best to his contemporaries. Indeed, as Wilden notes, “Without the benefit of cybernetic and communication theory, his ‘law of mind,’ for example, is easily dismissed as idealist anthropomorphism” (265).

Wilden alludes to the 1892 essay “The Law of Mind,” one of the more ambitious descriptions of Thirdness Peirce provided for a more or less popular audience. Therein Peirce makes a particularly interesting claim about consciousness and begins with a discussion of the nature of a boundary: “Suppose a surface to be part red and part blue; so that every point on it is either red or blue, and, of course, no part can be both red and blue. What, then, is the color of the boundary line between the red and the blue?” (EP1 322). Peirce answers that “the boundary is half red and half blue” and connects this notion to his theory of a consciousness: “In like manner, we find it necessary to hold that consciousness essentially occupies time, and what is present to the mind at any ordinary instant, is what is present during a moment in which that instant occurs. Thus, the present is half past and half to come” (EP1 322). This analogy proposes that consciousness involves the encounter with a boundary line, what he would characterize eleven years later in the Harvard lectures as “as double consciousness at once of an *ego* and a *non-ego*” (*Pragmatism* 160), or a sense in which “perception really does represent two objects to us, an *ego* and a *non-ego*...a past self that turns out to be nothing but a self and...a self that is to be faithful to the Truth in future” (*Pragmatism* 147). There is, all at once, a perception of what is supposedly immediate accompanied and undercut by its shadow, a “not” or other that Peirce characterizes as the future.

Thirdness as law entails futurity: “the being of these laws is a sort of *esse in futuro*” (*Pragmatism* 142). Immediate perception, or Firstness, is inevitably displaced or overturned by the difference made by Secondness, an “outward clash” as Peirce might put it, which inevitably raises the issue of the connective *unity* of these disparate elements, the double consciousness. What results is a logical recursiveness in which elements act upon one another in the manner of an oscillating “this then that” that not coincidentally resembles

the oscillating values of an imaginary number. As Peirce writes, “If two singulars A and B react upon one another, the action of A upon B and the action of B upon A are absolutely the same element of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, ordinary language makes the distinction of *agent* and *patient*... That is, a formal distinction is drawn between the action of A on B and the action of B on A although they are really the same fact” (*Pragmatism* 179). What this suggests is that Thirdness, as the unity of Firstness and Secondness, cannot be observed as a singular phenomenon, a singular *fact*, but only as a general process or law. A acts on B and B acts on A, but only recursively or alternately, creating in this sense a rudimentary sense of irreversible time: “One of the most marked features about the law of mind is that it makes time to have a definite direction of flow from past to future” (EP1 323). Thirdness as such then involves what Peirce refers to as an irreducible complexity, and therefore any particular observation of it involves a *distinction* as its unity is again divided by Secondness, a reduction or simplification of its nature that it cannot help but exceed: “It is certainly hard to believe, until one is forced to the belief, that a conception so obtrusively complex as Thirdness is should be an irreducible unanalyzable conception. What, one naturally exclaims, does this man think to convince us that a conception is complex and simple, at the same time! I might answer this by drawing a distinction. It is complex in the sense that difference features may be discriminated in it, but the peculiar idea of *complexity* that it contains, although it has complexity as its object, is an unanalyzable idea” (*Pragmatism* 186). This is a complexity, moreover, that when displaced or reduced by a distinction re-enters as the paradoxical *unity* of that difference, thus enacting the oscillations of semiotic meaning.

Peirce’s notion of “double consciousness” finds an unlikely precursor in Emerson’s magisterial essay “Fate,” “One key, one solution to the mysteries of human condition, one

solution to the old knots of fate, freedom, and foreknowledge, exists, the propounding, namely, of the double consciousness. A man must ride alternately on the horses of his private and public nature, as the equestrians in the circus throw themselves nimbly from horse to horse, or plant one foot on the back of one, and the other foot on the back of the other. So when a man is the victim of his fate...he is to rally on his relation to the Universe, which his ruin benefits" (*Prose* 278). It is no great leap to suggest that Peirce would find much in common with this sentiment, in the leaving of the *ego* for the futurity of the *non-ego*, a dispersal of the present self for the sake of the future one, for the indefinite universal community. There is common to both a sense in which Thirdness—something also called Truth, Reality, Community, or the Universe—stands for categories of thought that are, in effect, unthinkable for the ego and so thinkable only by the “non-ego” which takes the side of the future against the present. Thinkable, if you will, as *unthinkable*.

At this point the pursuit of clearness and intelligibility would seem to be of paramount importance since our understanding of Peirce and Emerson here teeters over the edge into an abyss of paradox. It seems that sharper theoretical tools are needed, an ability to make even finer distinctions. What both Peirce and Emerson are gesturing toward, I think, is what contemporary systems theory refers to as second-order observation, the observation *of* observation that takes place not by the ego but only by its other, “that other self that is just coming into life in the flow of time” (EP2 338). As already argued, Perry Miller’s classic essay “From Edwards to Emerson” laid the foundations for a modern or humanist account of American thought that, once free of the “restraining hand” of Calvinist doctrine, places Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson within a tradition of grasping for “face to face” encounters with the divinity of nature. This chapter lays the groundwork for an alternative genealogy found in the

thought of Emerson and Peirce that will then reach back to Edwards in the following chapter. This account that might be said to reapply a sense of restraint or limitation through an insistence on what Cary Wolfe has called an emphasis on the “contingency of observation” in Emerson’s writings. The privileged and objective capacity for scientific observation is replaced with an idea of observation that is fully captive to its contingency or embeddedness, or what Peirce might call its one-sidedness. In contemporary thought, the ramifications of observational contingency are most carefully described by the theories of self-reference in second-order systems theory and cybernetics. Through the reversals or oscillations of paradoxical self-reference, Peirce and Emerson achieve what Niklas Luhmann has described as a “system-internal unity of self-reference and external reference” (*Observations* 17) that ultimately demonstrates an attention to process or futurity.

Bringing systems theory to bear on these problems allows the meaning of an essay such as Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” to be described as something very different from an appropriation of the foundationalist or representationalist powers of the humanist subject. As Branka Arsic’s engaging book on Emerson argues, “Since nothing *is* but everything *becomes*, power is defined in ‘Self-Reliance’ as the capacity to endure the change of form” (5). What this means, more broadly, is that rather than seeking immediacy through a theory of the subject, through a self-grounding experience of interiority, Emerson is a philosopher of what Arsic calls a leaving or “a stepping out of oneself...intense becomings or elevation” (127). For Arsic’s Emerson, the quest for immediacy or intimacy culminates in a persistent leaving of well-worn customs and habits to allow for the arrival of the new, a change of form. However, Arsic’s emphasis on leaving involves as well as vision of “self-renewal” in which “all is luminous, healed of demonological divides” (127). One is tempted to connect this momentary renewal to Joan Richardson’s sense of the aesthetic

or even Miller's "sensuous apprehension of the total situation" ("Heart" 127) because both ideas seem to preclude the double consciousness of a more originary divide, the sense in which the moment of renewal is *already* marked by its other, or the way in which these events of luminous and sensuous immediacy are in some sense *produced* by the machine. This is not to take direct issue with Arsic's (quite beautiful and illuminating) account but to insist on a difference in emphasis, one that does not leave behind the machine in the experience of the event.

It is instructive in this respect to recall Stanley Cavell's sense of an Emersonian theory of language: "the possession of language as the subjection of oneself to the intelligible" (*Quest* 124). Seen through systems theory, this subjection becomes a *distinction* between communication and a ground of consciousness that, in traditionally humanist accounts, was presumed to be the very substance of communication. Consciousness or subjective feeling is distinguished, made communication's *other*, its environment, as the condition for communication to occur at all. In Cavell's terms, the necessity of this fundamental distinction derives from the romantic problem of self-accounting deprived of an objective or outside (say, divine) foundation. As Cavell writes, "Emerson needs a view of the world, a perspective on its fallenness, in which the *uncreatedness* of the individual manifests itself, in which human life appears as the individual's failure at self-creation, as a continuous loss of individual possibility in the face of some overpowering competitor" (*Quest* 111). One may read this perspective as a recognition of the *failure* of the romantic project. This continuous loss of possibility, a loss or negation of the individual, places philosophy along "...the path of accepting the loss of the world (you might say, accepting its loss of presence), accepting it as something which exists for us only in its loss (you might say its absence), or what presents itself as loss...And now what emerges is that what is to

be acknowledged is this existence as separate from me, as if gone from me. Since I lose the world in every impulse to philosophy, say in each of the countless ways the ordinary language philosophers find that I make my expressions unreadable, the world must be regained every day, in repetition, regained as gone” (*Quest* 172). For Emerson and Peirce, Cavell’s idea means that the experience of immanence, immediacy, or intimacy is then continually subjected to a kind of reversal or oscillation, a falling over into the *absence* of immanence, immediacy, and intimacy—a phenomenon systems theory understands through George Spencer-Brown’s concept of the “re-entry” of the original distinction (say, immanence/transcendence) into itself on one side. For Luhmann this reversal may be described as the distinction between indication and distinction, a difficult idea that nonetheless has bearing on pragmatism and its attempts to derive meaning from only the inside: “The distinction is made with the pragmatic intent to designate one side but not the other. What is distinguished, therefore, has to be distinguished from the distinction. Such a formulation might be dismissed as a mere rhetorical trifle; Spencer-Brown avoids this by differentiating the terms ‘indication’ (i.e., signification, designation) and ‘distinction.’ Yet, with or without this terminology, the problem remains. We cannot begin with the operation as long as the distinction between distinction and indication (signification) is not copied into the distinction” (“Paradox” 17). What this means, much in the Peircean sense of a sign always and only leading to another sign, is that distinctions do not terminate in the form of a solid determinate indication, but always entail further distinctions or determinations. Much as Thirdness may only be expressed through Thirdness, or a sign is the figure of translation for another sign, the inside of a distinction presents a continuum that must be distinguished for communication to continue. As Luhmann gnominically puts it, “only complexity can reduce complexity” (*Social Systems* 26).

We begin with a distinction: a “sense of the heart,” “total situation,” or pure possible in contrast to the cold mechanisms of the actual, a universe of cause and effect amenable to the reductive gaze of Laplace’s demon. On one side of Emerson there is Jonathan Edwards, whose attention to the immediacy of feeling is in fact (as shown in the following chapter) an attention to its self-referential *closure* from the immanence of the divine in the same moment that it is an emanation of it. This interpretation does not contradict Miller’s seminal engagements with Edwards so much as it places them under the pressure of self-reference. It sees the “incomplete” nature of Edwards’s Calvinism, seemingly divided against itself, as the site of his most exciting innovations. On the other side is Peirce, whose semiotics is grounded in a process-oriented triadic logic that resists dialectical synthesis. Peirce’s semiotics reimagines Edwards’s paradoxical theological formulations in more formal language while retaining the sense of feeling’s self-referential closure being the means through which it may also be a partial (and thus limited) representation of the universe—what Peirce says we are accustomed to call “the Truth.”

Peirce was particularly fond of the “map paradox”—a map so complete in its representation that it includes a representation of *itself*, which includes a further representation, and so on. In much the same way a sign as Thirdness is a partial or individual (or “abstract”) representation of the world that simultaneously acknowledges limitation through its difference from, or loss of, the world that then points to the future in the form of the necessity of further observations—in other words it *includes* its own limitation in the paradoxical form of future reference.

Consider Peirce’s definition of the form of Thirdness known as truth: “Truth is a character which attaches to an abstract proposition, such as a person might utter. It essentially depends upon that proposition’s not professing to be exactly true” (CP 5.564).

Likewise, for Emerson, “He in whom love of truth predominates will keep himself aloof from all mooring, and afloat. He will abstain from dogmatism...He submits to the inconvenience of suspense and imperfect opinion...” (*Essays* 426). And in an even more Peircean spirit, “No sentence will hold the whole truth, and the only way in which we can be just is by giving ourselves the lie...Things are, and are not, at the same time...” (*Essays* 585). Such formulations may also be comprehended as stating that all propositions (broadly conceived) are marked by an internal difference, by the distinction from the *other* that produces them in the first place. What both Emerson and Peirce have in common, then, is an idea of truth as the *other* or external side of a distinction. An external, moreover, only observable through the aporia or paradox revealed by second-order observation, an idea now worth exploring in greater detail.

Second-Order Observation and the World as Horizon

For systems theory, all observation involves the imposition of form, a kind of framing that individuates or actualizes one thing at the expense of another. My approach in this matter takes inspiration from Perry Miller’s comment that “the history of ideas—if it is to be anything more than a mail-order catalogue—demands of the historian not only a fluency in the concepts themselves but an ability to get underneath them” (*Errand* 185). Beneath ideas like Emersonian becoming or semiosis there is discovered an emphasis on *form* in contrast to the immanent content of thought, an insistence that “face to face” encounters are marked even from their point of origin with the iterative or mechanical means of their expression—which means that even the “point of origin” itself is lost in

Cavell's sense, recoverable only "ironically" in the form of a repetition or re-entry of difference.

The idea of form at issue draws from Luhmann and involves a transformation of the concept of observation: To observe is to draw a distinction, and thus the world is only available for observation as the product of difference. As Luhmann puts it, "A difference theoretical reconstruction of the concept of form shifts the emphasis from the (ordered) content of form to the difference it makes. It extends and places on the 'other side' of form the realm of what used to be considered chance and thereby subsumes under the concept of form any difference that marks a unity" (*Art* 27). Form is the initial severance of a self-referential distinction, a distinction that only indicates *one side* at the expense of the other, since "indicating both sides at once dissolves the distinction" (*Art* 65). This dissolves the notion of a distinction (say, mind/world) as a symmetrical and static dualism: "Forms must be articulated *asymmetrically*, since only one of their sides (the internal side) but not the other (the external side) is needed for further operations (elaborations, increases in complexity, and so on). Forms are generated by a *rupture of symmetry*" (*Art* 28). The other side, the side left unobserved and given paradigmatic expression for my purposes by what Miller calls the "hidden God" of the Puritans, is forever elusive, totally transformed through the manner of its expression, and thus not expressed at all: "The world remains invisible even when, and precisely when, it is laced with forms" (*Art* 33).

By abandoning the possibility of a unified or "total" perception this theory replaces the modern ideal of observation by denying the representational powers of the mind. World and mind no longer exist in a symmetrical observational framework, but rather "mind" (in a manner of speaking) observes the world through forms produced internally, and this is the sense in which the distinction indicates only one side. Even the

world as a whole, what Bertrand Russell would call the class of all classes, is the result of difference: “In order to observe the world as an object, one would have to *indicate* the world as distinguished from something else; one would have to presuppose a metaworld containing the world and its other. What functions as world in each case resists observation—as does the observing operation. The retreat into unobservability leaves nothing behind in the world; it erases, to speak with Jacques Derrida, its own traces. At best metaphysics (or theology? Or the rhetorical theory of how to use rhetorical forms? Or a second-order observer?) may just barely catch a glimpse of ‘the trace of the erasure of the trace’” (*Art* 57). In this fashion there is an acknowledgement of that which must remain unseen and unknown through what Luhmann calls a second-order observation as distinguished from first-order or “face to face” encounters:

The shift to a level of second-order observation radically alters what is presupposed as the *world*. The first-order observer finds his objects amidst other objects and events. He can assume that his observations are linked to other objects and events and together constitute a world. To him, the world is a *universitas rerum*.... The second-order observer, by contrast, observes the distinctions that first-order observers (including himself) employ to emphasize and indicate something. This operation renders the world invisible. First, the world itself cannot be observed. The act of observing, which constitutes itself in the move from an unmarked to a marked space, does not make the unmarked space disappear. (It is not clear how this could happen without a prior marking of that space.) Rather, observation preserves that space as a necessary component of its capacity to distinguish. The unmarked space remains on the other side of the form. Second, the distinguishing operation produces a two-sided form that cannot

be observed as a unity (unless one employs yet another distinction) and thus remains invisible in the operation. In this twofold sense, the notion of a final unity—of an “ultimate reality” that cannot assume a form because it has no other side—is displaced into the unobservable (*Art* 91).

Applied to the topic at hand, this theory allows for an investigation of a self-referential concept of form as a kind of symmetry breaking in Emerson and Peirce. Their move to second-order observation presents a seeming anachronism that is resolved (as already argued in the introduction) by noting that it draws from the Augustinian theological tradition of an unknowable and fundamentally mysterious God that remains uncontainable within worldly forms.

Like the pre-modern theologies from which he draws inspiration, Luhmann, along with George Spencer-Brown, and Heinz von Foerster—among others loosely gathered under the heading of “second-order cybernetics”—undercuts a key lynchpin of humanist and modernist philosophy: the self-present objective observer who perceives reality as a representation in consciousness. This concept of observation, comprehensively dismantled by Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, cannot withstand the incorporation of the observing distinction into the observation. The duality of the humanist observational scheme (mind/reality) must remove or hide the mark of distinction from the field of observation, thus producing the notion of wholeness or a “total situation.” In other words, the difference between mind and reality must remain unobserved in order for a representation to be perceived in consciousness as a whole without difference.

But this leads inevitably to certain familiar problems. Foucault writes that man “is a strange empirico-transcendental doublet, since he is a being such that knowledge will be

attained in him of what renders all knowledge possible” (318). In other words, in modern scientific discourses man performs a double role, both transcendental and empirical: “he is at the same time at the foundation of all positivities and present, in a way that cannot even be termed privileged, in the element of empirical things” (344). Man is both the foundation of knowledge, the seat of “evident and distinct perception,” and yet the object of that knowledge as well. Logically speaking, it would seem that the selection of either option must occlude the other, and the accomplishment of this occlusion stakes out a foundational claim by hiding a paradoxical reliance on its contrary; a figure that vanishes, as Foucault might say, as if it were drawn in sand at the edge of the ocean. We are either fully within and thus an object captive to nature in the grasp of an immanence healed of all divides, or apart and forever removed from it in the form of a transcendental subject vulnerable to the terrors of skepticism. This is precisely the knot that humanism since Descartes is designed to untie through the guarantee of a full and accurate representation, that the categories of the world may conform to the categories of the mind through the conceits of scientific rationalism, synthetic a priori judgment, dialectics of the idealist or materialist stripe, logical positivism, fundamental ontology, and so forth.

What this means is that a humanist and representationalist framework cannot cope with its own contingency. Humanism pretends to overcome its own self-referential distinctions. The difference is always hidden, unacknowledged, forgotten. By contrast, systems theory achieves a confrontation with the observational necessity of self-reference. Like Maxwell’s Demon, systems theory proposes that self-organizing systems operate by means of a primary distinction between themselves and their environment, and in this way they are able to overcome entropy (continue to reproduce their organization) through the development of internal complexity (more and more selective filters or

distinctions) known as autopoiesis. As Luhmann writes, “System differentiation is nothing more than the repetition within systems of the difference between system and environment” (*Social Systems* 7). This reverses the humanist scheme: rather than difference receding from the observational frame to allow for a unified perception, the *world* recedes as the unmarked side of a distinction while the observing form is confronted with the self-referential paradox of its own production—and therefore its lack of foundation. The observing form is forcefully confronted with the necessity of its own contingency, its *difference* from an environment, as the condition for it to exist at all. Luhmann’s systems theory does not attempt to elide or constrain self-reference, or simply disallow it like Russell in his theory of types, but instead assumes it as necessary and not to be avoided. Observations are confronted from within by their own limitations, by the differences that make continued self-reproduction or autopoiesis possible.

When considered as an all-encompassing theory of modernity systems theory leads to the realization that, as Cary Wolfe puts it, “Enlightenment rationality is not, as it were, rational enough, because it stops short of applying its own protocols and commitments to *itself*” (*Posthumanism* xx). This point raises second-order questions about rationality. As Peirce might say: how do we explain explanations? What is the reason for reason? We cannot help but find ourselves chasing our own tails. For William Rasch, “The whole that is modernity is the whole that strains to see itself and thus a whole that forever divides itself with every observation into more and more ‘facts.’ The whole that we now deal with is a self-referential whole, thus an inescapably paradoxical one” (“Self-Positing” 3). A systems theoretical approach displaces the human as the self-present site of an “evident and distinct perception” and instead disperses it throughout a proliferating network of determinative systems. Perceiving consciousness cannot function as a *ground*

devoid of difference and outside the world any longer. For Wolfe, “posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore, a historical development that points toward the necessity of new theoretical paradigms (but also thrusts them on us), a new mode of thought that comes after the cultural repressions and fantasies, the philosophical protocols and evasions, of humanism as a historically specific phenomenon” (*Posthumanism* xvi). As both Peirce and Emerson both repeatedly find occasion to say, we are in it, it is not in us.

Following from these premises, it becomes possible to argue that Emerson and Peirce are engaged in articulating a turn from a first-order to a second-order theory of observation, a posthumanist concept of subjectivity or feeling. When Peirce writes, “A person is not absolutely an individual. His thoughts are what he is ‘saying to himself,’ that is, is saying to that other self that is just coming into life in the flow of time” (EP2 338), he echoes Emerson: “This one fact the world hates, that the soul becomes” (*Essays* 271). Statements like these are expressions of the self-referential closure of feeling or subjectivity, leading to what Wolfe calls the “openness from closure” principle: “the very thing that separates us from the world *connects* us to the world, and self-referential, autopoietic closure, far from indicating a kind of solipsistic neo-Kantian idealism, actually is generative of openness to the environment” (*Posthumanism* xxi). This is because there is no observation without a distinction as a self-referential form that can only refer to the world in the form of its own limitation. This is, according to Luhmann in a statement worth quoting yet again, a “system-internal unity of self-reference and external reference” (*Observations* 17). The statements from Emerson and Peirce above recognize that the first-order constitution of the self through feeling (an immediate self-present experience of

consciousness) is only observable through a second-order observation from the point of view of the future in which the unity of the first-order distinction becomes available for observation. This *becoming available* resembles what David Wills calls a prosthesis, the hinge or joint at which concepts like the animate, natural, self, or feeling meet their contrary in the inanimate or mechanical means of their expression. The hinge of prosthetic displacement will here take the form of a self-referential distinction which represents the driving engine of becoming and the future reference of a sign.

Quasi-Transcendentalism: Deconstruction as Second-Order Observation

A more familiar resource for understanding the posthumanist tradition in American thought comes from deconstruction. In a contribution to the volume *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, Jacques Derrida makes some remarks concerning the notion of transcendental questioning, particularly Rudolph Gasche's insistence on the importance of the "quasi-transcendental" for deconstructive thinking:

Something that I learned from the great figures in the history of philosophy, from Husserl in particular, is the necessity of posing transcendental questions in order not to be held within the fragility of an incompetent empiricist discourse, and thus it is in order to avoid empiricism, positivism and psychologism that it is endlessly necessary to renew transcendental questioning. But such questioning must be renewed in taking account of the possibility of fiction, of accidentality and contingency, thereby ensuring that this new form of transcendental questioning only mimics the phantom of classical transcendental seriousness without

renouncing that which, within this phantom, constitutes an essential heritage
 (“Remarks” 82).

The question that follows is just what the character of this “transcendental questioning” might be: “Do I speak of this ‘quasi’ in an ironical, comic or parodic manner, or is it a question of something else? I believe both. There is irony and there is something else” (“Remarks” 81). Derrida is alluding to what he characterizes in *Positions* as “an undecidable resource that sets the system in motion” (3). In that text he goes on to state that undecidables are

...unities of simulacrum, “false” verbal properties (nominal or semantic) that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, but which, however, inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, *without ever* constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics...In fact, I attempt to bring the critical operation to bear against the unceasing reappropriation of this work of the simulacrum by a dialectics of the Hegelian type...for Hegelian idealism consists precisely of a *relève* of the binary oppositions of classical idealism, a resolution of contradiction into a third term that comes in order to *aufheben*, to deny while raising up, while idealizing, while sublimating into an anamnestic interiority (*Erinnerung*), while *interning* difference in a self-presence (43).

Rather than raise a binary opposition into a Hegelian synthesis, the undecidable persists in its slippery oscillations, taking definitive form, the form of a *decision*, only if its condition for possibility be the condition of its impossibility: “The undecidable is not merely the oscillation or the tension between two decisions. Undecidable—this is the experience of that which, though foreign and heterogeneous to the order of the calculable and the rule,

must nonetheless...deliver itself over to the impossible decision while taking account of law and rules. A decision that would not go through the rest and ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision; it would only be the programmable application or the continuous unfolding of a calculable process” (*Acts* 252). That which is *irreducible* to the calculations of a discernable program forces a *reduction* in order to be expressible or manifest through that program, but this reduction represents in turn a self-limiting. The quasi-transcendental, it would seem, is a transcendental questioning that erases itself, kicks its own legs out from underneath itself, as means to broach or traverse the undecidable as a “resource” for any system of meaning. Transcendental questioning, conceived in this way, is the same as deconstruction itself. It is how meaning *means*: “This deconstruction does not *apply* itself to such a text, however. It never applies itself to anything from the outside. It is in some way the operation or rather the very experience that this text, it seems to me, first does itself, by itself, on itself” (*Acts* 264). Much like the observational necessity of self-reference, the quasi-transcendental is a self-transcending gesture from *within*, fully within, a particular text.

Another approach to the question of the transcendental informed by the analytic tradition is found in Joseph Margolis’s *Pragmatism Without Foundations*. As Margolis states, “The pivotal issue remains how to recover transcendental reflections under the constraints of a radically historicized pragmatism” (173). Margolis’s approach, however, is careful to situate itself *after* the “deconstructive turn” (209) that makes the traditional Kantian transcendental impossible. What this means, in effect, is that we must “construe transcendental arguments relativistically” (255). Margolis describes a transcendental questioning from “inside.” The transcendental gesture, on this account, relativises conceptual schema by indicating that they are contingent, that an *other* conceptual schema

is equally possible—and all this without suggesting what the actual content of that alternative schema might be. As in the deconstructive maneuver, Margolis’s pragmatism calls attention to an other not reducible to any system of meaning from *within* those systems of meaning. “The trick is that such transcendental reasoning provides only a (second-order) *theory* of the adequacy of theories of truth and coherence and meaning: it does not (and could not) provide higher-order (universal) *criteria* for the proper use of such epistemic terms” (243).

The grounds must be internal all right, but the import of the realist claim must be logically stronger than any mere entailment of or induction from what those grounds affirm, in order to vindicate a scientific realism and not merely an internal realism. But that is to say, precisely, that what is needed is a transcendental argument, an argument that, however confined internally in epistemic terms, proposes and defends what (internally) appear to be the necessary and sufficient *external conditions* (or the best approximation to these that can be offered under the circumstances) in accord with which the realism of science can be sustained as an intelligible and reasonable option (242).

Margolis sees the search for foundations as a necessary quest for external conditions because only on the appeal to an externality (here I pointedly resist using the phrase “external reality”) can alternatives arise internally: “The search for universal foundations of knowledge goes on as before: but that search is now seen to take the form of inspecting alternative, diachronically conservative, general regularities or conditions that, by arguments to the best explanation (themselves alternately persuasive in accord with different weightings of pertinent considerations) are historically judged to be among the best candidates that have as yet been found for such status” (153). What I hope is

becoming clear is that what Margolis considers under the term “relativism” represents again a kind of Russellian paradox or Derridean undecidable wherein all conceptual schemes are placed on equal footing, even the conceptual scheme which comprises the frame of “relativism.” Though Margolis does not adopt the dramatic existential tenor of Derrida’s consideration of the conditions of possibility for a decision, he does concern himself with how a decision leaves itself open for revision by positing *itself* as contingent.

For my purposes, both Derrida and Margolis can be considered as circling around the question of a self-referential distinction, in this case between mind/world, inside/outside, or immanent/transcendent. These distinctions are one-sided or asymmetrical. When Derrida notoriously proclaims that there is nothing outside the text, he means that there is indeed nothing *but* text and that outside this text is *nothing*, that the text includes this external reference internally through a demand for further distinctions. The phenomenon under investigation here is how the given or immanent “total situation” includes a reference to an other *within itself*, or how it seems that the distinction between internal and external constitutes a unity. In formal term, this works much the same as an imaginary value in mathematics (the square root of a negative number) or the liar’s paradox: “This statement is false.” Taken as true, the statement disagrees with itself. Taken as false, it becomes true. Every distinction takes place only within a previous distinction (in this case the taken for granted distinction between true and false), and the “outside” (or un-indicated) half of the distinction can only re-enter or appear within and conditioned by the inside. This is what Spencer-Brown refers to as a *re-entry* of the initial distinction into itself. Only by means of re-entry, by copying the distinction inside the original distinction, can a text or system (or indeed, a mind) refer to an outside, other, or external transcendental. And these distinctions always require further distinctions.

For these reasons Luhmann replaces perceiving human consciousness with the notion of an observing system. It is important to divorce this idea of systems from the mechanistic reductionism of modern science. It is instead what Heinz von Foerster calls a non-trivial machine. By contrast, a trivial machine is one in which the output is predictable and stable: “following a predetermined rule, the machine takes a stimulus, a cause, or an input and produces a corresponding response, effect, or output, reliably and flawlessly. For example, you give the machine an A and it outputs a 1. Give it a B, and it will output event 2. The trivial machine constantly delivers us a certain output. It remains this way without ever changing” (*Understanding Systems* 54). A non-trivial machine is the opposite, in which the output is unstable or unpredictable: “Non-trivial machines are always changing their internal structure and their rules of transformation...For instance, you might input the letter A, and the machine will output the number 1. Then you repeat the procedure, and this time the number 4 is output. You input an A again, and a 1 is output, but when you input an A again, this time it outputs another result...This type of machine cannot be analytically determined, because it is always varying the rules of transformation” (*Understanding Systems* 56).

As von Foerster notes, there is in fact no such thing as a trivial machine. One may only “trivialize” a non-trivial machine. Your car, for instance, may seem trivial except for that one cold morning when it isn’t and thus defies expectations by not starting. As von Foerster goes on to say, “In my opinion, our Western culture has fallen head over heels in love with this type of [trivial] machine. It is the epitome of our yearning for certainty and security” (*Understanding Systems* 55). In fact, the entire technological sweep or *gestell* of modernity as analyzed by Heidegger in *The Question Concerning Technology* can be redescribed in this way as the attempted trivialization of non-trivial machines, as the

trivialization of the world itself. As von Foerster admits, this distinction is invented (as all distinctions are) but it is useful: “The advantage of the notion of the machine, if you follow me, is that you can get rid of the idea once and for all that living systems can be trivialized. The term ‘machine’ represents an abstract framework for speaking about input and output relationships and rules for transformation. The formalism that I am proposing here serves to argue in a disciplined manner and provides exact evidence that man and the universe cannot be trivialized and that the analytical problem cannot be solved” (*Understanding Systems* 59). Von Foerster freely admits to his own work being a sort of ethical intervention in its descriptions of modernity. There is nothing necessary about this description, it refers to no ontology, no *is*. The opposite can always be the case: “In fact, you can turn anything that you hear upside down” (*Understanding Systems* 25). Or, more precisely, “every statement has a finite range” (*Understanding Systems* 39). As William Rasch puts it, “We can rationally judge no longer the legitimacy of ends but only the best means of achieving these ends. The choice of ultimate values, therefore, is a pre- or non-rational enterprise” (“Self-Positing” 26). All beginnings are arbitrary. Which is also to say that every statement and every distinction has only a first order, as in immediate, grasp of its own observations—but it cannot see what seeing necessarily occludes in order for it to see at all.

Von Foerster’s response to this dilemma involves a second-order observation of the first order observation, what he refers to as the “cybernetics of cybernetics.” To explain, “compare a typical first-order cybernetics concept such as ‘purpose,’ (as being the equivalent of ‘why’) with a second-order question, ‘What is the purpose of purpose?’” (*Understanding* 301). It is easy to see that taking a second-order path involves a circularity that powerfully foregrounds the contingency of any particular observation or proposition.

In Spencer-Brown's words, "And so on, and so on you will eventually construct the universe, in every detail and potentiality, as you know it now; but then, again, what you will construct will not be all, for by the time you will have reached what now is, the universe will have expanded into a new order to contain what will then be...In this sense, in respect of its own information, the universe must expand to escape the telescopes through which we, who are it, are trying to capture it, which is us. The snake eats itself, the dog chases its tail" (106). Such statements are echoed in the realm of quantum mechanics, most eloquently by David Bohm, "How are we to think coherently of a single, unbroken, flowing actuality of existence as a whole, containing both thought (consciousness) and external reality as we experience it...What could it mean for one part of reality to 'know' another, and to what extent would this be possible?" (xi). The attempt to answer these questions, and to discover just what the repercussions of any answer must be, can be seen as the impetus for what follows.

The Practice of Feeling

"Greatness appeals to the future." – "Self-Reliance" (*Essays* 266)

What I have been calling feeling, immanence, or immediacy is inarguably one of the central themes of Emerson's essays. As Sharon Cameron observes, perhaps unintentionally echoing Perry Miller, "It is an unmediated 'face-to-face' which the essays again and again retrieve. They can do this 'again and again' precisely because there is no rite, no symbol or authorized entity...nothing *repeatable* to be apprehended in these essays" (97). Cameron's paradoxical statement that there is nothing *repeatable* about the

first-order experiences that Emerson pursues “again and again” already hints toward a second-order interpretation. In other words, Emerson’s text takes back the “face to face” encounters at the very moment it provides them. The essays masterfully perform second-order observation through a relentless observation of the paradoxical unity of the distinctions on which first-order observations are founded. This can only reveal itself as something like an oscillation, a back and forth: “There is the incoming or the receding of God: that is all we can affirm; and we can show neither how nor why” (*Essays* 122).

Sermon CLXII, known as the sermon on the Lord’s Supper and delivered in 1832, four years before *Nature*, shows Emerson’s concern for discovering an immanent relationship with the world to be a guiding force in his thought from the beginning, but it also draws the fundamental distinction that is at work throughout his writings. The epigraph from Romans 14:17 that opens the sermon makes a distinction between habit or ritual and a source of feeling: “The Kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness and peace and joy in the holy ghost.” After announcing the subject of his sermon to be the Lord’s Supper and giving a short survey of disputes and differences in the practice of it, Emerson announces, “Having recently paid particular attention to this subject, I was led to the conclusion that Jesus did not intend to establish an institution for perpetual observance when he ate the Passover with his disciples” (*Prose* 18). He then proceeds to examine the scriptural foundation for the Lord’s Supper, finds it wanting, and concludes, “I think it was good for them. I think it is not suited to this day” (*Prose* 22). This statement announces an attempt to ground customs and practices on a living interaction with the world, and not merely customs abstractly transmitted across historical time and space. A proper comportment with the world requires an attention to living feeling: “It is of the greatest importance that whatever forms we use should be animated by our

feelings; that our religion through all its acts should be living and operative” (*Prose* 24).

And more particularly, “This mode of commemorating Christ is not suitable to me. That is reason enough why I should abandon it” (*Prose* 24). Indeed, Emerson goes on to suggest that the true essence of Christianity consists in this resistance to “formal religion.” “That for which Paul lived and died so gloriously; that for which Jesus was crucified; the end that animated the thousand martyrs and heroes that have followed him, was to redeem us from a formal religion, and teach us to seek our wellbeing in the reformation of the soul” (*Prose* 25). By contrast, pre-Christian religion “was all body, it had no life” (*Prose* 25). And feeling that he must “do nothing which I cannot do with my whole heart” (*Prose* 25), Emerson resigns his position as a Christian minister at the conclusion of the sermon.

With the announcement of his resignation, Emerson was free to pursue his “original relation to the universe.” As is well known, it is possible to trace through Emerson’s early work a variety of different formulations of this romantic pursuit of momentary exultations. The infamous and much ridiculed passage in *Nature* is perhaps the most salient: “I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, -- master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty” (*Essays* 10). It is hard to think of a more complete description of Miller’s “total situation” from the inside, in which an upsurge of feeling makes all that was habitually familiar now empty and rote, a vision in which no other is referred or signified, and which allows for new relationships imbued with living feeling. “Self-Reliance,” written in 1841, also contains a comparable passage of what is there called the “source,” as that power with which we seek connection:

The inquiry leads us to that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct. We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst all later teachings are tuitions. In that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, all things find their common origin...Here is the fountain of action and of thought...Its presence or its absence is all we can affirm. Every man discriminates between the voluntary acts of his mind, and his involuntary perceptions, and knows that to his involuntary perceptions a perfect faith is due (*Essays* 269).

In “Compensation,” he writes, “Under all this running sea of circumstance, whose waters ebb and flow with perfect balance, lies the aboriginal abyss of real Being. Essence, or God, is not a relation, or a part, but the whole. Being is the vast affirmative, excluding negation, self-balanced, and swallowing up all relations, parts, and times within itself. Nature, truth, virtue, are the influx from thence” (*Essays* 299). Similar passages can be produced indefinitely. Emerson’s thought up through the first series of *Essays* returns “again and again” to this seemingly first-order immanent relationship with the universe as a wholeness which may contain what we perceive to be opposites.

But there is a turning in Emerson’s thought that observes these moments only in their withdrawal. Branka Arsic convincingly demonstrates in *On Leaving* that Emerson’s determination to ground practice in feeling is not the same as a self-grounding subjectivity because it is impersonal: “Power, then, belongs to the ‘it.’ *It is, it works, it thinks*” (162). As Emerson himself puts it in “Fate,” “It is not in us, but we are in it” (*Essays* 955)—a statement with an uncanny similarity to one written by Peirce: “Thought is more without us than within. It is we that are in it, rather than it in any of us” (CP 8.189). Power is that capacity for self-abandonment to the impersonal which carries us along to becoming new

selves. Cary Wolfe shows that this impersonal is best understood as an orientation towards the future: “‘Self-Recovery,’ then, is paradoxically oriented not toward some originary state but toward *futurity*, toward not being but *becoming*” (*Posthumanism* 262). These interpretations are complementary because an appeal to the *it* can only take place, as Arsic repeatedly states, as a passive reception—and therefore passivity becomes an acknowledgement of the contingency of the present situation, the sense in which we are *given over* (Cavell might say *uncreated*), which is to say an acknowledgement of the present situation’s other, its ungroundedness or onwardness. The only response is patience, waiting on the future that is always arriving within us, without us. This is why, as Wolfe notes, self-reference is such a useful concept for interpreting Emerson. It locates the latent blind spot even for transparent eyeballs.

Emerson’s “double consciousness” takes form as an oscillation between contrary positions, without resolving into dialectical synthesis. We may take hold of one side only to have the other wrap around and swallow it. Consider “Fate”—an essay in which nothing is asserted except for its contrary to be asserted shortly after. Or “Nominalist and Realist,” in which he writes “‘Your turn now, my turn next,’ is the rule of the game” (*Essays* 584). Or in “Intellect,” suggesting quite forcefully the unity of self-reference and external-reference: “We are stung by desire for new thought; but when we receive a new thought, it is only the old thought with a new face, and though we make it our own, we instantly crave another; we are not really enriched” (*Essays* 425). It is new, and it is not. Elsewhere he points to the irreducible quality of this oscillating power: “This which I think and feel underlay every former state of life and circumstances, as it does underlie my present, and what is called life, and what is called death” (*Essays* 271). It is the unseen unity of our distinctions. “Fate” takes this logic to its limits: “This is true, and that other is

true. But our geometry cannot span these extreme points, and reconcile them. What to do? By obeying each thought frankly, by harping, or, if you will, pounding on each string, we learn at least its power” (*Essays* 943). As Wolfe points out, Emerson’s project “directs us not to an originary fixed self-substance but toward a *power* and a *process*: not toward the past but toward the future, or rather toward futurity itself, conceived as a horizon, where, paradoxically, the only ‘self’ to ‘recover’ is a self that one has not yet been, for the self *only* exists in its becoming” (*Posthumanism* 248). Power, what I propose as an Emersonian description of Thirdness, is continually elusive, old and new at once, underlying both death and life, because it is only expressed through a mechanical idea of process, and only then in a necessarily limited sense.

Along these same lines, Sharon Cameron makes an interesting and insightful observation in *Impersonality*, noting that for Emerson, “...the goal of these essays is generality (however it is called) and although the style is often inimitably general—Emerson writing in no man’s voice—the point of the essays’ climactic figures is the representation of an encounter whose truth is somehow tied to its stylistic or rhetorical singularity” (99). Cameron introduces yet another pair of important terms for understanding Emerson: singularity and generality. The second term, generality, represents the mechanical or prosthetic expression of the event of singularity. For Cameron, Emerson’s impersonal is general, “there is characteristically vacancy in the place where we might expect to find a person” (94). Therefore, “the very moods that we might suppose to define our individual persons, when scrutinized in Emerson’s representations, rather contradict the idea of the personal...the impersonal calls into question the very idea of a self as a stable or predictable entity, for the moods which define our perceptions, beliefs, thoughts are in effect only contingent on circumstance”

(89). Cameron perceptively notes that Emerson's philosophy of feeling fails to found a presence of self, and so the essays lead us by the hand from a seemingly intuitive private experience of feeling, a living attachment to the world, to an impersonal generality: "In fact 'ravishment' (that proprioceptive sense of what occurs at that moment when the personal is annihilated by the influx of the impersonal) is what the essays attempt to dramatize" (93). There is in Cameron's formulation an oscillation between the personal and impersonal, and more broadly singularity and generality. What is going on can best be described by showing that these distinctions operate for Emerson as self-referential distinctions. Cameron suggests that Emerson's failure to *preserve* a distinction between the impersonal and personal in fact leads to the collapse of his entire project:

Consequently, what deprives Emerson's voice of authority is that his statements are *insufficiently* personal, except in the passages I have discussed, and there only by inference. That is, their authority is neither functional *nor* personal. The *content* of Emerson's impersonal implies a heroic *context*: an encounter, as well as an acknowledgement of the real or, in the language of "Character," the "*know[ing of] its face*." But the heroic implies a *person's* contact with the real...Emerson, strangely, *doesn't* know this. He invents a mode of discourse dissociated from the institutionally religious. He produces a discourse that has access to the real prior to the mediating symbol or rite whose necessity it obviates. The legitimacy of that discourse therefore depends on the visibility of the person speaking. It depends on the fact that an epiphanic encounter occurs to someone *in particular* who, by virtue of that particularity, is in a position to describe it. But except in the essay's climactic moments—moments that, as I've argued, are typified by their

idiosyncrasy—Emerson then erodes the representation of any self-articulated distinction which would make his discourse legible and meaningful (102).

But isn't this the point? Isn't the notion of a consummate "epiphanic encounter" meant as a figure for what I *don't* get to have? What always slips out of my grasp? It is precisely Emerson's posthumanist intervention to create a discourse in which particular "epiphanic encounters" are *not* localized in a singular self-present consciousness, that these moments are in fact the moments that a limited self is surpassed. Cameron argues that such encounters must be grounded in individual experience, whereas for Emerson it is precisely the individual that must give way for the impersonal "real" to encroach on the fortress of selfhood. The personal is *constituted* by the impersonal. The distinction between personal and impersonal takes places *already* within that very distinction on the side of the personal, which means that even the personal is not whole in itself but constituted by a distinction which is continually exceeded by the re-entry of the impersonal. Cameron already gestures towards this when she writes, "Thus Emerson is unable to represent the encounter for the sake of which his discourse exists—for there is ultimately no one to whom that encounter happens" (102). Thus when Emerson writes, "When good is near you, when you have life in yourself, it is not by any known or accustomed way; you shall not discern the foot-prints of any other; you shall not see the face of man; you shall not hear any name;---- the way, the thought, the good, shall be wholly strange and new" (*Essays* 271), when he suggests that the life in us is not our own, it can be understood as the re-entry of the impersonal, as the *becoming* impersonal that Cavell sees as the subjection to intelligibility and that Wolfe sees as the reference to the future—as the other side of a distinction.

Emerson grapples with the “other” or external side of a distinction through his attempts to represent that which is unrepresentable, that which can *only* be represented as unrepresentable, named as unnameable; thus encountering a figure that will take the form of absent grief and an unnamed son in “Experience.” Cameron’s charge that “One of the reasons Emerson fails to acknowledge others’ suffering, which is never very real to him, is that he fails to acknowledge his own suffering, which is never very real to him” (107) can be answered by arguing that Emerson’s failure to acknowledge suffering is in fact a refusal to *represent* it. It cannot be represented due to the singular and personal nature of grief, it is always transformed, de-personalized, by its mode of expression—it is always the other or “unmarked” side of the distinction. Emerson seems to anticipate such criticisms when he writes, “And yet one, who conceives the true order of nature, and beholds the visible as proceeding from the invisible, cannot state his thought, without seeming to those who study the physical laws, to do them some injustice. There is an intrinsic defect in the organ. Language overstates. Statements of the infinite are usually felt to be unjust to the finite, and blasphemous” (*Essays* 119). Cameron rightfully points to a paradox in Emerson’s thought, but rather than revealing an absent foundation or aporia that erodes the entire project, instead it is the driving engine of a process oriented philosophy, what Wolfe calls “philosophy as a writing practice” (*Posthumanism* 245). The paradox is generative.

Nowhere is this more evident than in “Fate,” in which Emerson examines and enacts the self-reference of observation—the paradoxical unity of observational distinctions. He signals an aversion to dialectical synthesis very early in the essay, “Our geometry cannot span the huge orbits of the prevailing ideas, behold their return, and reconcile their opposition” (*Essays* 943). And then, “We can only obey our own polarity”

(*Essays* 261). Rather than dissolve the opposition of ideas into a teleology, Emerson does the reverse by undercutting the determinate meaning of statement with its opposite. “Fate” offers a theory of meaning *without* offering a foundation, teleological or otherwise, in which contrary meanings will coalesce. “We are incompetent to solve the times,” (*Essays* 943) and therefore we cannot observe the unity of these oppositions except in their inevitable, ineluctable succession. Unity, according to this theory of meaning, means self-referential paradox, it can only be observed as a second order phenomenon. It’s this, and then it’s that.

At least part of what Emerson is up to in “Fate” is analyzing the relationship between thought and reality, a pair of terms given any number of different assignments in Emerson’s work, but perhaps most often called “power” and “fate.” The first half of the essay is in large part a description of the sense that “Wise men feel that there is something which cannot be talked or voted away,—a strap or belt which girds the world” (*Essays* 944). This is the extent of Emerson’s realism—which sees reality as simply an internal *resistance* to the power of thought: “Whatever limits us, we call Fate” (*Essays* 952). He writes, “On one side, elemental order, sandstone and granite, rock-ledges, peat-bog, forest, sea and shore; and, on the other part, thought, the spirit which composes and decomposes nature,—here they are, side by side, god and devil, mind and matter, kind and conspirator, belt and spasm, riding peacefully together in the eye and brain of every man” (*Essays* 953). What kind of system is this? What is the meaning of such a “stupendous antagonism” (*Essays* 953)? I’ve suggested it is the unity of self-referential paradox, and Emerson gestures in this direction when he writes, “Now whether, seeing these two things, fate and power, we are permitted to believe in unity?” (*Essays* 958). He answers his own question, “But relation and connection are not somewhere and

sometimes, but everywhere and always. The divine order does not stop where their sight stops. The friendly power works on the same rules, in the next farm, and the next planet. But, where they have not experience, they run against it, and hurt themselves. Fate, then, is a name for facts not yet passed under the fire of thought;--for causes which are yet unpenetrated. But every jet of chaos which threatens to exterminate us, is convertible by intellect into wholesome force” (*Essays* 958). I take this to mean that unity *isn't* observable, but nevertheless it does not stop where sight stops. We simply “run against it” in the oscillations and reversals of our experience. Much as Peircean theorist and semiotician Floyd Merrell writes, “Everything is both affirmative and negative, pregnant with its contrary. The universe incessantly engages in on going agonistics” (268).

For Emerson to say such things he has to have a theory of meaning (incompetent as we are to solve it) that nevertheless connects an idea to its moment and *only* its moment, thus occluding itself at the very moment of its emergence. Any other theory of meaning in which, say, we are competent to judge the total meaning of an idea from here to eternity would fatally decouple the idea from the feeling that gives it life and power. Much like the coupling of the personal and the impersonal, in which each is grounded in the other, Emerson couples power and fate—or, in fact, any pair of contrary terms you care to name, since in some sense Emerson’s target in “Fate” is most properly conceived to be the nature of antagonism itself. Having pounded on the string of fate, Emerson then extols its necessary contradiction: “But Fate has its lord; limitation its limits...If Fate follows and limits power, power attends and antagonizes Fate” (*Essays* 953). And a bit later: “To hazard the contradiction, -- freedom is necessary. If you please to plant yourself on the side of Fate, and say, Fate is all; then we say, a part of Fate is the freedom of man. Forever wells up the impulse of choosing and acting in the soul. Intellect annuls Fate. So

far as a man thinks, he is free” (*Essays* 953). And so far as he is free, that freedom is grounded and granted by fate. Here Emerson makes explicit what was only implicit in the relation of the personal to the impersonal. Fate itself includes freedom, or the power of thought. And thought traces its own limits, traverses the distinction between itself and fate: “This insight throws us on the party and interest of the Universe, against all and sundry; against ourselves, as much as others. A man speaking from insight affirms of himself what is true of the mind: seeing its immortality, he says, I am immortal; seeing its invincibility, he says, I am strong. It is not in us, but we are in it. It is of the maker, not of what is made. All things are touched and changed by it. This uses, and is not used” (*Essays* 954-955). Fate and freedom are grounded in one another in a self-referential, circular process, producing the generative paradoxes of succession and substitution, in which we “ride alternately” (*Essays* 966) on this then that, the back and forth, the power “not personal nor impersonal” (*Essays* 968) which creates the universe ever anew.

Welded Signs and Quasi-Minds

“Chance is indeterminacy, is freedom. But the action of freedom issues in the strictest of law.” —“Design and Chance” (EP1 222)

Peirce’s philosophy repeats these Emersonian themes while removing to an even further extent the costumes of theology or romanticism. As if helpfully directing us to such an idea, he writes,

I may mention, for the benefit of those who are curious in studying mental biographies, that I was born and reared in the neighborhood of Concord,—I mean in Cambridge,—at the time when Emerson, Hedge, and their friends were

disseminating the ideas that they had caught from Schelling, and Schelling from Plotinus, from Boehm, or from God knows what minds stricken with the monstrous mysticism of the East. But the atmosphere of Cambridge held many an antiseptic against Concord transcendentalism; and I am not conscious of having contracted any of that virus. Nevertheless, it is probable that some cultured bacilli, some benignant form of the disease was implanted in my soul, unawares, and that now, after long incubation, it comes to the surface, modified by mathematical conceptions and by training in physical investigations (EP1 313).

Following Peirce's own insight, and in light of "Fate," I am led to consider "Design and Chance," which, because it is still from an early stage in Peirce's philosophy, makes attempted comparisons with the looser and more experimental writing of Emerson a bit easier. It was written to be delivered as a lecture in 1884, about six years after the seminal work "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" in which William James later discovered the pragmatic method.

In "Design and Chance" Peirce ingeniously argues that the supposedly immutable laws of nature are themselves the product of evolution: "May not the laws of physics be habits gradually acquired by systems[?]" (EP1 223). This idea represents an important development in Peirce's thought, and pursues a number of themes familiar from "Fate" and Emerson's later work in general, yet "modified" by scientific concerns. For instance, when Peirce writes, "...I maintain that at one stage of inquiry it is quite right to insist strongly on the exactitude of established laws...while at a later stage it is proper to question the exactitude of those same laws when we are in possession of a guiding idea which shows us in what manner they may possibly be corrected" (EP1 216), it can be

interpreted in an Emersonian fashion as analogous to the relationship between feeling and habit as process.

In particular, Peirce claims that there is an irreducible element of *chance* in the universe: “Bodies obey sensibly the laws of mechanics; but may it not be that if our means of measurement were inconceivably nicer, or if we were to wait inconceivable ages for an exception, exceptions irreducible in their own nature to any law would be found? In short, may it not be that *chance*, in the Aristotelian sense, mere absence of cause, has to be admitted as having some slight place in the universe” (EP1 217). Remarkably, Peirce nods to “Darwin’s great work” (EP1 215) but refuses to accept that the law of evolution really explains much unless we can explain what explanations are, thus moving from first-order to second-order questions: “And then the general fact that there are laws, how is that to be explained?” (EP1 218). And further, “Evolution is the postulate of logic, itself; for what is an *explanation* but the adoption of a simpler supposition to account for a complex state of things” (EP1 218). This suggests that part of what Peirce seems to be driving at is that the universe considered as a whole may be irreducibly complex.

This is not the same as saying that the world is inexplicable, as he goes on to say, “...the hypothesis of absolute chance is part and parcel of the hypothesis that everything is explicable, not absolutely, rigidly without the smallest inexactitude or sporadic exception, for that is a self-contradictory supposition but yet explicable in a general way. Explicability has no determinate & absolute limit” (EP1 219). Again, we find two contrary terms being welded together, grounded one in the other. In this case it is the duality of law, or explicability, and absolute chance, which means the absence of law. The irreducible complexity of the world derives from this interplay of law and chance, which for Peirce becomes the driving engine of evolution. In fact, Peirce suggests a distinction

between chance as the evolution of complexity and entropy as the dissipation of systems: “But although no force can counteract this tendency [to entropy], chance may and will have the opposite influence. Force is in the long run dissipative; chance is in the long run concentrative. The dissipation of energy by the regular laws of nature is by those very laws accompanied by circumstances more and more favorable to its reconcentration by chance...And from this it follows that chance must act to move things in the long run from a state of homogeneity to a state of heterogeneity” (EP1 221). Chance is interpreted from the inside of law as entropy, as the limitation of law’s explanatory power. Peirce’s vision here encapsulates a sophisticated philosophy of modernity as the observation of infinite complexity through self-reference. “Design and Chance,” again much like “Fate,” strives to examine the nature of antagonisms without recourse to synthesis. Peirce’s asymptotic realism, “the possibility of an indefinite approximation toward a complete explanation of nature,” (EP1 222) is how he conceptualizes how self-referential closure trends inevitably towards more and more complex systems as a response to chance or entropy—the reduction of complexity by complexity. And so physical laws, the evolution of which Peirce is attempting to describe in the lecture, work much like what Heinz von Foerster calls *eigenvalues*:

When a non-trivial machine reuses what it has produced or has created an output as input, a circular figure is created. And when this circularity is produced and the machine has been in operation for a while, something very interesting takes place. Stable values emerge...Let’s say I take a pocket calculator and enter a number of your choice. I take the square root of this number, and when the calculator has come up with it I press on the square root button again. In so doing, a circular process evolves. The output becomes the input and the result of an operation is

used as the starting point of the same operation, the result of which in turn serves as the starting point of this operation. After a certain period of time and the continuous use of the operation of the square root, a so-called *eigenvalue* emerges...and while you can't explain how it came to be, you are able to predict it (*Understanding Systems* 60).

Peirce puts it in a more Darwinian framework: "Systems or compounds which have bad habits are quickly destroyed, those which have no habits follow the same course; only those which have good habits tend to survive" (EP1 223). Or more precisely put in another essay, "if experience in general is to fluctuate irregularly to and fro, in a manner to deprive the ratio sought of all definite value, we shall be able to find out approximately within what limits its fluctuates" (EP1 201). A system with no habits is no system, and a system with habits determined to the last instance is no system. Either extreme precludes growth or change. Good habits, then, are the best and most flexible response to entropy, and thus fallible and always ready for revision—for leaving themselves behind. As Emerson puts it, "But things are ever grouping themselves according to higher or more interior laws" (*Essays* 335).

"Design and Chance" provides an ideal introduction to Peirce because it invokes the philosophical problems that semiotics was designed to solve. Peirce's specific intervention consists primarily in the replacement of the "mind" of German idealism with a concept of a sign, and so his philosophy can be seen as driving right past what John Deely calls the detour that is modern philosophy. Deely's *The Four Ages of Understanding* argues for a revisionist history of philosophy in which the notion of the sign takes center stage. In his own words,

From the High Middle Ages down to the time of Descartes we find a lively and continuous discussion of sign which, through a series of important if unfamiliar controversies on both sides of the thirteenth century, leads to a basic split in the closing Latin centuries. On one side stand those who think that the general notion of sign is an empty name, a *flatus vocis*, a nominalism, no more than a ‘relation of reason’, an *ens rationis*. On the other side are those who are able to ground the general notion in an understanding of relation as unique, suprasubjective mode of being, a veritable dual citizen of the order of *ens reale* and *ens rationis* alike, according to shifting circumstances.

Modern philosophy, from this point of view, appears essentially as an exploration of the nominalist alternative; and postmodern thought begins with the acknowledgement of the bankruptcy of the modern effort, combined with the determination pioneered by C.S. Peirce to explore the alternative, ‘the road not taken’, the ‘second destiny’ that had been identified in the closing Latin centuries but forgotten thereafter. Peirce’s postmodern resumption of premodern epistemological themes produces a number of immediately dramatic and surprising results (xxxi).

Deely persuasively connects Peirce backwards to pre-modern thought, but Peirce’s place in the history of American thought, particularly American romanticism, remains somewhat anomalous. One gets the impression that had William James never attributed (maybe too generously) to Peirce the term “pragmatism” then scholars would perhaps have been quite content to leave Peirce all alone up in the attic of American intellectual history.

Following the fame of James's pragmatism, Peirce was concerned with distinguishing himself from what he saw as errors in that popular approach. As Max Fisch writes, "Peirce held that his own strictly limited form of pragmatism was provable, and it was only within the semeiotic framework that the proof could be made evident" (338). The following passage from a letter Peirce wrote to Lady Welby in 1908 is particularly illuminating: "I define a Sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its Interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former: My insertion of 'upon a person' is a sop to Cerebrus, because I despair of making my own broader conception understood" (qtd. in Fisch 343). Fisch asks, "What was that broader, that more generalized, conception? Negatively, it is apparent that it did not involve 'the mind of an interpreter' or 'an effect upon a person.' Did it also not involve an utterer, a sign-giver? In the last account of his theory of signs which Peirce had published, as a framework, within which to introduce his existential graphs, the place of the sign-utterer or sign-giver had been taken by the Graphist" (343). Fisch then points to the following fascinating passage from Peirce: "Moreover, signs require at least two *Quasi-minds*; a *Quasi-utterer* and a *Quasi-interpreter*; and although these two are at one (i.e. *are* one mind) in the sign itself, they must nevertheless be distinct. In the Sign they are, so to say, *welded*. Accordingly, it is not merely a fact of human Psychology, but a necessity of Logic, that every logical evolution of thought should be dialogic" (CP 4.551). As Fisch continues, "The sop to Cerberus was lapsing from sign-talk into psych-talk—from semeiotic into psychology" (343).

All of this of course raises the question: what, then, is a sign? As Anthony Wilden has already remarked, this is surprisingly difficult to answer. Peirce's definition above is

interesting because it recalls the example of Thirdness offered at the beginning of this chapter: A causes B and B causes A. Similarly, a sign is an act of determination that has also *already* been determined, enacting a sequence of further and further determinations in a somewhat circular fashion. The object is always prior to the determining sign, and the interpretant always after: “The object and the interpretant are thus merely the two correlates of the sign; the one being antecedent, the other consequent of the sign” (EP2 410). The interpretant, as a form of Thirdness or irreducible complexity, always calls for a further determination. An individual sign is thus always partial or incomplete, and always stands for the possibility of further determinations.

But this merely raises our question in a different form: what is a determination? I want to suggest that a determining sign is a self-referential distinction from an object (understood as a prior sign)—a distinction, as it were, within a prior distinction. As Peirce puts it in a passage notable for its emphatic and confounding insistence, “Truth is the conformity of a representamen to its object,--*its* object, ITS object” (EP2 380). Why *its* object? Because, as Peirce continues, the sign must be “compelled” by its object: “There must be an action of the object upon the sign to render the latter true” (EP2 380). This is the action or “struggle” of Secondness, the category for difference which makes truth *one-sided*. Conformity takes place *within* the sign: the object does not appear as itself, but only as the limited or partial determination represented by the sign. Signs do not *express* objects: “The object of a Sign, then, is necessarily unexpressed in the sign, taken by itself” (EP2 407). The object of the sign never appears as itself, but only through the prior determination of the sign. On the other hand, the interpretant (as the unity of sign and object) requires the compelling action of a future distinction. This is the onwardness of signs.

When understood in the terms of Peirce's modal logic, an interpretant corresponds to "potentiality" while an object corresponds to "actuality," resembling quite closely Luhmann's analysis of meaning: "Something pertaining to the realm of potentiality must be actualized, which in turn requires that the difference between actuality and potentiality occur at the heart of experience and communication—formally speaking, the form 'reenters' the form" (*Art* 139). And much like Emerson's vision of a process-oriented philosophy, Peirce's sign as a figure for Thirdness can then be understood as the paradoxical unity of a distinction. This means that sign and object are, we may borrow the term, "welded"—they are one, but nevertheless distinct. Self-referential vacillation, a "necessity of logic," is what constitutes their "dialogic" nature.

When Peirce says "we" are in "it" he means we are *in* Thirdness, in and surrounded by signs. In contrast to Ferdinand de Saussure's signifier/signified distinction, there is no transcendental position which may observe the set of all signifier/signified couplets because such a perspective would be a metaphysical position over and above the action of signs—a non-semiotic position that could only be occupied by God. Even *that* all-encompassing perspective must be of the nature of a sign because it is itself the product of difference. Derrida argues in *Of Grammatology* that Saussure's structuralist semiotics requires the framing action of human consciousness as a transcendental move up to a metaphysical perspective in order for signifiers and signifieds to be able to link up within a common space, thus grounding the semiotic differend in consciousness. And as Anne Freadman points out, "The Saussurean account of the relation between *langue* and *parole* not only restricts it to synchronicity, but it does so because it confines it to the space of a single language. *Parole* 'realizes' an ideal *material* form—the phonological signifier, say, in a phonetic approximation. If this approximation deviates too greatly from the ideal form, it

counts as a mistake, or even as unintelligible. *Langue* is therefore a rule governing that materiality. The most remarkable difference with Peirce lies here” (153). As Freadman goes on to say, Peirce’s sign is not the instance of a rule, but the figure of translation itself (which points to the translation of the translation, and so on). A sign is a distinction that demands another distinction.

Love and Asymmetry

“Everything is a Miracle.”
—Heinz von Foerster (*Understanding Systems* 63)

Peirce’s text, with its often unrelenting dryness, often conceals the heart of a true romantic. Indeed, as Soren Brier has pointed out in *Cybersemiotics*, Peirce can quite easily be connected to hylozoism, or the belief that the universe is itself alive. Many of his works offer tantalizing glimpses of the sublime, yet withholding all the while any ultimate consummation. This effect of Peirce’s writing probably accounts for both the devotion bordering on obsession of his acolytes as well as the air of perplexed disinterest attending his thought throughout most of the previous century. One such follower, Floyd Merrell, still carries on brilliantly the fantasia of science, logic, philosophy, mathematics, psychology, and semiotics that can make Peirce’s writing such a thrilling experience for receptive readers. For my own more narrow purposes, this usually unnoted aspect of Peirce’s thought, this undercurrent of wonder and love, connects him more easily to the raptures of Emerson and Edwards. In particular, Peirce’s philosophy espouses an Emersonian theory of love marked with Peirce’s own predilections toward a formalism that actually places him quite close to von Foerster: “The way I see it, ‘wonder’ can be

provided with a solid foundation if you describe it using strict logic and very precise formalisms” (*Understanding Systems* 62). Moreover, the concept of love held by Edwards, Emerson, and Peirce recalls the distinction between the personal and impersonal analyzed above. For instance, Jonathan Edwards provides a definition of love that emphasizes it as a self-overcoming process:

How soon do earthly lovers come to an end of their discoveries of each other’s beauty! How soon do they see all that is to be seen, are they united as near as it is possible and have communion as intimate as possible! How soon do they come to the most endearing expressions of love that it is possible to come to, so that no new ways can be invented, given, or received! And how happy is that love in which there is an eternal progress in all these things, wherein new beauties are continually discovered, and more and more loveliness, and in which we shall forever increase in beauty ourselves. When we shall be made capable of finding out, and giving, and shall receive more and more endearing expressions of love forever, our union will become more close and communion more intimate (*Reader* 41).

This idea of love is a self-referential process, the conflict of infinite and finite—which is to say that it sees the finitude of the finite as the very evidence of the infinite, just out of the corner of its eye. Likewise, for Emerson, by “separating in each soul that which is divine from the taint which it has contracted in the world, the lover ascends to the highest beauty, to the love and knowledge of the Divinity, by steps on this ladder of created souls” (*Essays* 334). The desire to confront another “face to face” provides the foundation for a theory of love in which the face of another only appears by eluding consummation, that love expresses itself most fully only in growth and evolution.

In “Love,” Emerson demonstrates what we might coldly call the structural indeterminacy of affective relationships: “Who can analyze the nameless charm which glances from one and another face and form?” (*Essays* 332). Much like Edwards, Emerson understands love as its own contradiction and maintains the emptiness of material forms. In both, we find a contrast between faith and a more worldly sensibility. Faith is the transitional mode, the nameless charm that carries man from one form of life to another, the “visitations of that power to his heart and brain, which created all things new” (*Essays* 330). In fact, Emerson, much like Edwards, sees love as the eclipse of particulars for the sake of an expansion of the general:

Nature, uncontainable, flowing, forelooking, in the first sentiment of kindness anticipates already a benevolence which shall lose all particular regards in its general light. The introduction to this felicity is in a private and tender relation of one to one, which is the enchantment of human life; which, like a certain divine rage and enthusiasm, seizes on man at one period, and works a revolution in his mind and body; unites him to his race, pledges him to the domestic and civic relations, carries him with new sympathy into nature, enhances the power of the senses, opens the imagination, adds to his character heroic and sacred attributes, establishes marriage, and gives permanence to human society (*Essays* 327).

“Love” even goes so far as to say that mere material facts, which is to say the actual experience of love for any particular person, are irrelevant to the topic: “We must leave a too close and lingering adherence to facts, and study the sentiment as it appeared in hope and not in history” (*Essays* 328). And explicitly, “Thus even love, which is the deification of persons, must become more impersonal every day” (*Essays* 335). What this most clearly resembles aside from Edwards’s Puritan injunctions against worldly love is Peirce’s

decidedly more modern injunctions against what he considered to be the scourge of philosophy: nominalism.

Detecting and expunging the belief that general concepts have no actual reality from the philosophy of others and himself occupies a great deal of Peirce's work. As he writes, "The question whether the *genus homo* has any existence except as individuals, is the question whether there is anything of any more dignity, worth, and importance than individual happiness, individual aspirations, and individual life" (EP1105). A defense of the idea that Thirdness or generality is *real* is the principle point of Peirce's famous *Monist* series of papers that in many particulars announce his mature philosophy. As seen above, Thirdness represents the conjunction of opposites. In ontology, it is the union of possibility and actuality in the form of *potentiality*. In semiotics, it is the interpretant, which is the meaning of a sign in the conformity of representamen and object. In both cases, as I have argued, it represents the unity but not identity of a distinction. In this context, Thirdness can be understood as "Evolutionary Love," the title of one of Peirce's more famous essays. The reality of generals can then be understood in terms of potentiality, as the reality of a future tense, the reality of growth or evolution, of change and freedom being the only law. The following words from Emerson apply equally for Peirce's philosophy, which sees the process of universal growth as the development of love: "passion rebuilds the world for the youth. It makes all things alive and significant. Nature grows conscious" (*Essays* 331).

"Evolutionary Love" (1893) was written near the midpoint of Peirce's philosophical trajectory, and it offers one of the more vivid accounts of his concept of re-entry and self-reference apart from logical or mathematical formulations. Peirce's metaphysical speculations in the latter portions of his life were often concerned with

proving the continuity underlying our distinctions, what he termed “synechism.” As Douglas Anderson ably puts it “he emphasizes the ways in which synechism envisages the unity, but not the identity, of oppositional moments in the architectonic” (29). Synechism is Peirce’s term for an attempt to think not so much outside of binary schemes but alongside them, finding the points at which mutual extremes merge into one another. Peirce writes, “There is a famous saying of Parmenides,...’being is, and not-being is nothing.’ This sounds plausible, yet synechism flatly denies it, declaring that being is a matter of more or less, so as to merge insensibly into nothing” (CP 7.569). Peirce can be seen in some ways as attempting to ground (not just ethically but logically) the expansion of modernity, not to overcome it in a Hegelian *telos* or Nietzschean will to power. In contrast, he finds the basis for modernity in a theory of love.

If we grant that the universe desires to cut itself into parts and observe itself, we could also see this as a desire of the universe to commune with itself, to bring itself into itself, always escaping its own grasp. Put in another framework, it could be seen as love: “The movement of love is circular, at one and the same impulse projecting creations into independency and drawing them into harmony” (EP1 353). In the concept of *agape* or “cherishing love” as the love of what is different or apart, Peirce finds a way to conceptualize the unity of a distinction as re-entry. How else to account for the fact that the universe conceives a desire to cut itself into parts and then to be drawn into communion with those severed parts? In Peirce’s astonishing restatement of the Golden Rule, “Sacrifice your own perfection to the perfectionment of your neighbor” (EP1 353), do we not find a call for second-order observation, for taking on the burden of your own incompleteness to contribute to another’s unity? There is no unity in individuality, but only in communion: “The gospel of Christ says that progress comes from every individual

merging his individuality in sympathy with his neighbors” (EP1 357). Love needs hate as its contrary, and according to Peirce not only do these opposites require one another for the purpose of differentiation, but simultaneously these distinctions desire to unify. Love is identified as distinct from hate, and love must take hate, its contrary, as its object. “Thus, the love that God is, is not a love of which hatred is the contrary; otherwise Satan would be a coordinate power; but it is a love which embraces hatred as an imperfect stage of it, an Anteros—yea, even needs hatred and hatefulness as its object. For self-love is no love; so if God’s self is love, that which he loves must be defect of love; just as luminary can light up that which otherwise would be dark” (EP1 353). How else to understand this but as a self-referential distinction, as the re-entry and recontainment of the opposing force?

These reflections can just as well be understood within the context of Derrida’s attempt to ethically ground a modernity of difference without identity: “If you love only those who love you and to the extent that they love you, if you hold so strictly to this symmetry, mutuality, and reciprocity, then you give nothing, no love, and the reserve of your wages will be like a tax that is imposed or a debt that is repaid, like the acquittal of a debt. In order to deserve or expect an infinitely higher salary, one that goes beyond the perception of what is due, you have to give without taking account and love those who don’t love you” (106). Love is, the word insistently suggests itself, *assymetrical*, and through the imbalance of first this side then that it operates as the power behind growth and change, glancing from one and another face and form. And von Foerster: “There is no separation. We are connected with the world and the other person...Whatever happens to you happens to me. And whatever happens to me happens to you. And in so doing, someone gives you their life, and you give them yours” (*Understanding Systems* 159). And Peirce: “growth comes only from love, from—I will not say self-*sacrifice*, but from the

ardent impulse to fulfil another's highest impulse" (EP1 354). And Edwards: "For here the effect is made the cause of that of which it is the effect: our happiness, consisting in the happiness of the person beloved, is made the cause of our love to that person. Whereas, the truth plainly is that our love to the person is the cause of our delighting, or being happy in his happiness. How comes our happiness to consist in the happiness of such as we love, but by our hearts being first united to them in affection, so that as it were, we look on them as ourselves, and so on their happiness as our own?" (*Reader* 260). And Emerson: "That which is so beautiful and attractive as these relations must be succeeded and supplanted only by what is more beautiful, and so on for ever" (*Essays* 337). And so on.

Chapter Three

Seeing and Unseeing: Jonathan Edwards and the Ethics of Self-Reference

“Self-reference is the infinite in finite guise” –Louis H. Kauffman (“Self-Reference” 2)

Beginning with the classic texts of Perry Miller and including even the most sophisticated contemporary accounts, the Puritan theology of Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) is often found, at its heart (or in its “sense of the heart” to use Miller’s famous phrase) to resemble modern humanism. Miller’s seminal biography of Edwards provides an account that forms the basis for many subsequent interpretations: “Edwards went to nature and experience, not in search of the possible, but of the given, of that which cannot be controverted, of that to which reason has access only through perception and pain, that of which logic is the servant and from which dialectic receives its premises” (*Jonathan Edwards* 46). Miller describes this search as expressing a desire for “face to face” (*Errand* 185) encounters with the unaccountable God of Calvinism, a desire that directly links Edwards to Ralph Waldo Emerson and thus the entire tradition of American humanism which culminates in the “psychological empiricism” of William James. However, this narrative, while certainly compelling, betrays one of the central tenants of Edwards’s Calvinism. As Miller puts it, “It is of the essence of this theology that God, the force, the power, the life of the universe, remains to men hidden, unknowable, unpredictable. He is the ultimate secret, the awful mystery. God’s nature ‘is capable properly of no definition,’ so that all that one can say is that ‘God is an incomprehensible,

first, and absolute Being.’ He cannot be approached directly; man cannot stand face to face with Him...” (*Errand* 51).

Of course, Miller was well aware of this inconsistency, as it forms the backbone of many of his most trenchant insights. As he writes, “Most of the issues that were so hotly contested among seventeenth-century theologians were connected with attempts to resolve this discrepancy between the God of everyday providence and the God who dispensed His grace according to no rule but His own pleasure” (*New England Mind* 33). What distinguishes Edwards is the *desire*, the manner of the attempt—a problem that interestingly enough is only resolved through the assistance of a grace that indeed, if fleetingly, provides the “face to face” encounters that Edwards seeks. It is at precisely this point—a liminal space between the grasping after self-present and self-grounding encounters and the “the absolute, incomprehensible, and transcendent sovereignty of God” (*Errand* 51)—that a different and potentially more accurate account of Edwards’s theology can emerge.

This argument relies in part on Michael Clark’s assertion that the Puritans “never could accept the material world as a basis for their epistemology; such a premise would subordinate the rational soul to the senses and, more important, would deny the transcendent authority that the Puritans granted to the basic tenets of their theology” (282). Clark argues that “The most fundamental principle of Puritan semiology was the absolute discontinuity between two of the three ‘forms’ constituting any fully significant sign” (280). This “absolute discontinuity”—a formulation that resembles what Miller called a “fundamental distrust” (*Errand* 97) or the “discrepancy” noted above—represented “neither a dualistic oscillation between this world and the next nor a continuous hierarchy connecting the two. Rather, it was much closer to a dialectic, a

gesture toward synthesis built out of the dramatic conflict of faith as thesis and world as antithesis” (291). Clark’s argument is an advance beyond the stalemate identified by Miller, but he also cannot help but fold Puritan thought into dialectical premises of the Hegelian stripe, which is to say that there is an emphasis on gestures toward dialectical synthesis, a premise that would seem to contradict the “absolute discontinuity” originally identified. Instead, the semiology that Clark outlines suggests a *failure* (implied by Clark’s use of the phrase “gesture toward”) of synthesis.

This problem, so far identified as a “discrepancy,” “fundamental distrust,” or “absolute discontinuity,” will surface again and again in scholarly accounts of Edwards’s theology. On one end, there are accounts which produce a kind of synthesis of the terms, an approach exemplified by Joan Richardson’s *A Natural History of Pragmatism* (2007). Richardson supposes, even if implicitly, some form of correspondence or relation of mind and environment subsumed in the “face to face” encounter with an overarching *naturalism*. She writes, “While Edwards believed his insights to have come from God, from our later point of view it is easy to see that his response was animal, that is, the response of a creature struggling to survive in an environment where ‘the squirming facts exceed[ed] the squamous mind’” (49); and “he embedded the divine within the empirical” (50); and so on. In explaining the exclusion of Hawthorne and Melville from her study, Richardson writes, “each was, by his own account, still too haunted by the idea of an ‘unnaturalized’ Calvinist deity to shed the feeling of a mind inhabited by guilt to be able to put on a new habit, the feeling of what happens to a mind enjoying ‘an original relation to the universe’” (12). But it would seem to be precisely Edwards’s fascination for the unnaturalized and unnaturalizable Calvinist deity that guides much of his thought. Richardson, by contrast, naturalizes Edwards, replaces God with Nature, as a means to

resolve the discrepancies of his thought and to connect him to the organicist romanticism she finds in Emerson and James.

It would seem obvious that one possible means of avoiding the synthesis of such readings would be to simply understand Edwards as affirming the dualisms of Calvinist thought. This is the tack taken up in R.C. De Prosopo's *Theism in the Discourse of Jonathan Edwards* (1985). Here the "absolute discontinuity" is fundamental, as De Prosopo argues that "modern interpretations of Edwards propose that, at least when gripped by those infrequent, heightened affections he hopes are gracious, Edwards senses a union between the visible and invisible that contradicts dualistic and anticipates romantic visionary experience, and this despite unmistakable evidence that when Edwards contemplates these emotions, both his own and those of others, in the tranquility of his theological writings, the dualism of his understanding is pronounced, leading him to question feeling in ways that seem precisely to differentiate him both from later romantic visionaries and from supposedly protoromantic contemporaries" (67). De Prosopo's reading of Edwards is especially useful because it resists the temptation to read Edwards as a synthesizer of dualistic terms. By distancing Edwards from the standard romantic readings of Emerson, De Prosopo departs from the typical narrative of American intellectual history: "...the theist discursive pattern revealed in Edwards's writing represents a single phenomenon differentiated from humanism in American literature" (187).

De Prosopo's argument represents an important corrective, but like the humanistic readings it criticizes it in fact removes some of the complexity from Edwards's thought, sometimes quite explicitly choosing the "dualistic" interpretation at the expense of the humanist one deriving from Miller. For instance, "Edwards's inability to conceive an identity between Creator and Creation does not blind him to the subtle resemblance

between them...Although he holds lesser expectations about the experience of nature than do romantic writers, Edwards perceives a likeness between natural beauties and divine excellency sufficient to inspire a religious enjoyment of the wilderness of eighteenth-century New England...This enjoyment is one of Edwards's attributes that most intrigues modern critics. Remove Edwards's discussion of the logic of Creation, remove also the many qualifications he attaches to his idea of the visibility of divine beauty, and the resulting text, though short, resembles romantic discourse" (175). De Prosopo's characterization of humanist or romantic interpretations of Edwards in this passage remains incisive and is well taken, but nevertheless he repeats an error similar to the one he identifies, and so it would seem difficult to account for the very passages that (though short) have seemed to so incite the imaginations of humanist readers of Edwards.

A way forward, a kind of middle way, would seem to be available in Stephen H. Daniel's *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards* (1994). The book's subtitle, "A Study in Divine Semiotics," identifies the approach taken by Daniel, one of enormous and impressive complexity that nevertheless smuggles in the very synthesis (and thus implicit humanism) that De Prosopo argues against, which is to say that it lapses into yet another version of the "face to face" encounter. Daniel's operative distinction is that between transcendence and immanence, and he argues decisively for the latter: "To describe the fall into the mentality of classical modernity, Edwards situates talk of subjectivity and alienation in a discourse that is itself neither subjective nor alien, because it does not claim to be self-validating or to refer to any transcendent principles. The immanent system of signification constituted by the language of God (expressed in nature and Scripture) does not need to refer to itself or anything beyond itself for legitimacy, for the notion of legitimacy is itself a feature of classical modernity describable only in terms of the divine

discursive exchange” (22). In this scheme there is no place for the transcendence/immanence distinction that would seem to be of such paramount importance for Calvinism because transcendence would seem to find itself dissolved into the immanent systems of signification.

Daniel thus evades the distinctions that Edwards takes for granted. For Daniel, “Every communication assumes a relation between that which is said and that which is meant, between a signifier and a signified. The disposition to communicate is the displacement of the signified by a signifier, and thus the designation of the signified as that which is other. The signifier itself identifies the signified as an absence to which the signifier points” (127). Here Daniel supposes an immanent “system of signification” as the ground of this differential field of signification, in which relations achieve a kind of immanent self-presence that bridges the divisions between real and ideal, mind and matter, and, most fundamentally for this discussion, God and Creation: “the subject and predicate of a proposition have no meaning apart from the proposition, and the proposition has no meaning apart from its function in a discourse” (134). Which is to say that for Daniel a discourse *itself* functions autonomously beyond the requirements of difference that the terms *within* a discourse operate under. The laws of discourse do not apply to the discourse as a whole. It is in this sense that a discourse for Daniel can be said to be the immanent, symmetrical, and self-present guarantor of meaning.

It is worth comparing Daniel’s divine semiotics with Gregory Bateson’s view of God in *Steps to An Ecology of Mind*, which can be said in some respects to resemble the God that Daniel finds in Edwards:

The individual mind is immanent, but not only in the body. It is immanent also in pathways and messages outside the body; and there is a larger Mind, of which the

individual is only a subsystem. This larger Mind is comparable to God and is perhaps what some people mean by ‘God,’ but it is still immanent in the total inter-connected social system and planetary ecology. Freudian psychology expanded the concept of mind inward to include the whole communication system within the body—the automatic, the habitual and the vast range of unconscious processes. What I am saying expands mind outward. And both of these changes reduce the scope of the conscious self. A certain humility becomes appropriate, tempered by the dignity or joy of being part of something bigger. A part - if you will - of God (467-477).

Such sentiments about the immanence of God are impious for the Calvinist Edwards, which insists on the strict division between transcendence and immanence. Daniel’s semiotic immanence replaces the “face to face” encounters of Miller with the immanence of semiotic meaning. For Edwards, such encounters would seem impossible because it discovers God, however indirectly, in the world itself. Niklas Luhmann’s critique of semiotics bears on this point: “All differences are only differences *between* signs...A sign must first and foremost distinguish itself from something that cannot be distinguished: from emptiness, unmarked space, the white of paper, the silence that is assumed in every perception of sound. And this is true especially when a sign is supposed to be nothing more than a distinction between signifier and signified” (*Observations* 109). Here Luhmann places semiotics itself under the pressure of what he calls a recursive self-reference.

Daniel’s semiotic understanding of Edwards’s theology, by contrast, finds a higher unity in immanent “discourses” or “communicative exchanges” *within* which the distinction between signifier and signified takes place. According to Luhmann, “The function of a sign always requires reference to something specific, while excluding self-reference. It

requires the assymetrization of a basal, recursive self-reference. In other words, there is neither a sign for the world nor a sign that indicates itself' (*Social Systems* 71). For the system of semiotics this assumed unified discourse is necessary for its continued operation. It cannot, however, justify that unity on its own terms. God may be the ground of a distinction, the immanence in which the distinction takes place, but is it not true that even that designation is the product of a distinction? This is the inescapable nature of self-reference for Luhmann, and the problems addressed here will have resonance for Edwards.

Luhmann's concept of self-reference points the way to a different understanding of Edwards's theology. The "absolute discontinuity" will be transformed into a self-referential distinction, which in another manner of speaking can be seen as a *one sided* distinction, precluding any form of synthesis. The presence of the immediate or unmediated (or a God that cannot be mediated), the "face to face" encounter, is paradoxically occluded, already given over to the material or mechanical as the condition of its emergence, thus recasting observation as the act of distinction, a one-sided distinction that can only observe one side, while the other side remains unobservable. Describing observation as a distinction undercuts the modern humanist concept of observation as a representation in the mind, a move that links Edwards to contemporary posthumanist theory, particularly the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann and Heinz von Foerster, and it argues that the best way to make clear sense of the strange oscillating dualisms in Edwards's thought is to analyze them as self-referential distinctions. It is in this capacity that Edwards can be fruitfully compared with theories of self-reference, most specifically Luhmann's systems theory. We can agree with Daniel when he writes, "Instead of being transcendent pronouncements about the relation of God and creation,

Edwards's suppositions themselves enact the same logic that governs the possibility for any and all meaning and existence" (110), but only by insisting that this logic retains a kind of quasi-transcendentalism that undercuts and occludes the self-present immanence of meaning by understanding it as a self-referential distinction.

Self-reference

"God don't fully obtain his design in any one particular state that the world has been in at one time, but in the various successive states that the world is in, in different ages, connected in a scheme. 'Tis evident that he don't fully obtain his end, his design, in any particular state that the world has ever been in; for if so, we would have no change. But God is continually causing revolutions"—Jonathan Edwards (*Works* 18:92)

The connections between Luhmann's thought and traditional theology are not difficult to find. Luhmann himself claimed, "The partner for radical constructivism is therefore not traditional epistemology, but traditional theology" ("Cognition" 252). This is so, as Luhmann points out, because traditional theology took as its aim the twin and contradictory duties to simultaneously represent God and to remember that God is unrepresentable, and was therefore in the business of continually investigating its own foundations. As Luhmann writes of Nicholas of Cusa's theology, "God is beyond all distinctions, even beyond the distinction between distinctions, and beyond the distinction between distinctness and indistinctness. He is the *non-aliud*, that which is not different from anything different. In him, everything that transcends distinctness coincides insofar as it transcends distinctness—i.e., that which cannot be conceived as greater, as smaller, as quicker, as slower (*coincidentia oppositorum*)... that God in this way makes himself

comprehensible in his incomprehensibility; and that truth, although finally incomprehensible, consists for human beings in the correspondence of their distinctions with those of things” (“Cognition” 250). Luhmann’s observations show that the goal of traditional theology was not so much the rational representation of God but to perceive God as that which cannot be perceived. Or as Luhmann cryptically puts it in a different context, “Reality is what one does not perceive when one perceives it” (*Theories* 145). More specifically, Luhmann’s systems theory uses self-reference as a means to contemplate the “oneness” beyond all distinctions, beyond the world of material creation. As Stefan Rossbach puts it in an important essay, “It is the systems theory itself that evokes a consciousness of the pre-cosmic unity...any observation is a self-limitation” (“Gnosis” 251). Luhmann’s self-referential theory is designed to focus on its *own* internal limitations, recalling Cusa’s “learned ignorance.” The contemplation of a blind spot, attempting to see that one cannot see what one cannot see (ad infinitum), is in this way a modern form of mysticism. Luhmann writes, “Knowledge can know only itself, although it can—as if out of the corner of its eye—determine that this is possible only if there is more than mere cognition. Cognition deals with an external world that remains unknown and, as a result, has to come to see that it cannot see what it cannot see” (*Theories* 129). It is this hidden and un-seeable “unknown” that recalls the Gnostic beyond in Rossbach’s view. And for my own purposes it reveals that systems theory is the best means of interpreting Edwards’s own searching self-referential theories of the beyond because Edwards is unusually attuned to the space outside the systems of his observations.

Edwards gropes for something approaching a vacillation, finding the wellsprings of God’s presence in the sensuous unmediated wholeness of a quality of feeling, but also carefully distinguishes sensuous qualities from the direct presence of God. Edwards seems

concerned, in other words, and much like Nicholas of Cusa before him, not with God's immediacy or mediation but the *failure* of his mediation through forms. Miller writes, "Holding himself by brute will power within the forms of ancient Calvinism, he filled those forms with a new and throbbing spirit. Beneath the dogmas of the old theology he discovered a different cosmos from that of the seventeenth century, a dynamic world, filled with the presence of God, quickened with divine life, pervaded with joy and ecstasy." (*Errand* 195). Adding to Miller's insight I will argue that Edwards has a keen sense of the distorting power of perception, and thus his idea of God has much in common with Luhmann's idea of reality as the foundational blind spot of any observing system—the quickening of divine life is not simply God but the difference made by a self-referential distinction coping with what it cannot see. Even the forms of Calvinism, as Miller perceptively notes, are not sufficient to contain the idea of God, and Edwards's theology presses hard at these boundaries precisely in order to indicate divinity through the *limitation* of observing forms, demonstrating in turn God's unlimitedness. As Rossbach puts it, "The infinite unity of the 'world' reappears in the theory in the absence of limits of problematization" (251).

The Forms of Creation

"As there is an infinite fullness of all possible good in God—a fullness of every perfection, of all excellency and beauty, and of infinite happiness—and as this fullness is capable of communication, or emanation *ad extra*; so it seems a thing amiable and valuable in itself that this infinite fountain of good should send forth abundant streams, that this infinite fountain of light should, diffusing its excellent fullness, pour forth light all around" (*Works* 8:432).

Two very early pieces by Edwards, “Of Being” (1721) and “The Mind” (1723), both show that Edwards hit upon his critical ideas at a precocious age and simply developed them in further complexity throughout his life. In “Of Being,” Edwards is concerned with what might be called the problem of continuity. How is this moment in time connected to the moment that immediately preceded it? What is the connecting thread? Only God can hold things together such that they are continuous: “We fancy there may be figures and magnitudes, relations and properties, without anyone’s knowing of it. But it is our imagination hurts us. We don’t know what figures and properties are” (*Works* 6:204). Which of course raises the question, what are figures and properties if they are not real existing qualities of the objects we encounter? And in answer to this question Edwards writes a passage worth quoting at length:

Let us suppose the world deprived of every ray of light, so that there should not be the least glimmering of light in the universe. Now all will own that in such a case, the universe would be immediately really deprived of all its colors. One part of the universe is no more red, or blue, or green, or yellow, or black, or white, or light, or dark, or transparent or opaque than another. There would be no visible distinction between the world and the rest of the incomprehensible void—yea, there would be no difference in these respects between the world and the infinite void. That is, any part of that void would really be as light and as dark, as white and as black, as red and green, as blue and as brown, as transparent and as opaque as any part of the universe. Or, as there would be in such case no difference between the world and nothing in these respects, so there would be no difference between one part of the world and another. All, in these respects, is alike confounded with and indistinguishable from infinite emptiness (*Works* 6:204).

The gambit of this essay is that here Edwards supposes a *distinction* as the fundamental act of perception. Since the universe is continuous, there are no differences but that we make them so. Shapes and colors and magnitudes, therefore, are not a matter of the inherent qualities of a substance, but exist only in the act of an interested observation. As von Foerster puts it, “‘out there’ there is no light and no color, there are only electromagnetic waves; ‘out there’ there is no sound and no music, there are only periodic variations of air pressure” (*Understanding* 214), and so on. Put most succinctly, “The environment as we perceive it is our invention” (*Understanding* 212).

Daniel links this aspect of Edwards to a lineage of medieval suppositional logic: “Instead of assuming that things are significant prior to their incorporation into the rhetoric of creation, Edwards’s supposition theory defines each thing in terms of its supposition of something other than itself. In literally supposing a thing we imply the existence of God as the other always already removed in supposing any thing” (85-86). As noted earlier, Daniel’s formulation here seems to suggest that God is in some sense synonymous with discourse itself—that the differences and suppositions which are the mechanics of semiotics can only have meaning when placed *within* a discourse called “the rhetoric of creation,” something one presumes is like the class of all classes. Does this mean that God is responsible for connecting our signs with their meanings? This gives the term discourse a rather weighty theological role, for it seems to escape from its own suppositional logic. Does it contain itself? As if in answer Daniel later writes, “To say that the world exists means that it points to its displacement as that which gives it meaning. Accordingly, God is not that which supposes or displaces the world, for that would mean that the world exists independently from God. Rather, God is the supposition of the world, the world’s having been supposed or displaced” (108). For Daniel, God is the other

“always already removed” (i.e., the discourse of discourses within which the play of differences takes place) but when one wants to suppose the world itself as a whole (“the world exists”) God manages to elude us like Bertrand Russell’s barber. A binary of God/world subordinates God to the immanence of that distinction and suggests an equivalence between God and creation, an obvious fallacy for Edwards. There is no overriding discourse for the distinction between God and world, no discourse that gives that distinction any meaning.

How then to understand God? By supposing that *God is the unity of the distinction between the world and its other*. God is not the world’s other, for the world does not exist independently of God (as De Prosopo notes, self-creation is impossible for Edwards, and the continuity of the world is sustained only by the will of God). Nor is the world identical to God (this is impious pantheism). Awkwardly stated, God is not the world, and not the not-world, neither here nor there. To recall Luhmman, “He is the *non-aliud*, that which is not different from anything different.” Or Miller: “Puritan thinking on the subject of the Deity always confronted the initial difficulty that in one sense thinking about Him was impossible” (*New England Mind* 10). Or Derrida: “God is the name of the absolute metonymy, what it names by displacing the names, the substitution and what substitutes itself in the name of this substitution” (*Acts* 293). God is neither in nor out of the system. God is the unity of the distinction world/not-world, not anything identifiable *in* the distinction, but merely the fact of re-entry which points, mystically, paradoxically, to the unity of the distinction. God is the unity (but not the identity) of the distinction. This is self-referential paradox as religious meditation.

Self-reference removes man from his places as an objective observer (the starting point for modernity) and places him squarely in the thick of things as an active participant

in what unfolds before him. All views are partial views. For Edwards, the human mind has a stake in creation. In Miller's words, Edwards "asserted the radical conception of man as an active, interested, passionate being, whose relation to objective reality is factual to the extent that he is concerned about it, whose anxieties and not his clear thinking make his destiny" (*Jonathan Edwards* 184). A fallen human being, in other words, is a *part* of the world, fully within and not above it. The only unity is a unity beyond the makings of any distinctions, thus out of sight, but held together as continuous by the infinite observing powers of God: "God is by definition a Being who perceives not separate entities in succession, but the totality of being in a single, eternal glance" (*Jonathan Edwards* 298). With these ideas in view, Edward's mature theology begins to take shape as a sophisticated elaboration of a self-referential distinction between the act of seeing and what is seen—the place of a fallen mortal capable only of partial observations of the plenitude of God and creation. Following Heinz von Foerster's cybernetics, the observer and the observed are both the same, and not the same, with the perceiving act distinguishing itself from the perceived in a form of self-referential closure that references an unseen "other" as a necessary part of the observation. It is possible, through the vacillations of self-reference, to catch what escapes perception through an acknowledgement of that very exclusion. We cannot see *what* we cannot see, but we can see *that* we cannot see. In religious terms this is translated into the distinction between immanence and transcendence. As Miller writes, "Because the source of ideas is external, and yet every idea is a self's manner of conceiving, there must come a time when the redeemed self realizes that a sensation cannot be clutched to his bosom as a private luxury, but belongs to a system of impressions that has a logic deeper and more beautiful than any incidental advantages (or disadvantages) that accrue to him" (*Jonathan Edwards*

191). Edwards most developed version of this thesis is *The Nature of True Virtue*, yet the theme persists at varying levels of importance throughout Edwards's writing.

Consider for instance the "new simple idea" in *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746). As Michael J. McClymond has noted, there are two mutually exclusive ways to interpret the notion of spiritual perception in *Religious Affections*. One may either argue that it is "discontinuous" with material reality and thus representing a "sixth sense," or one may follow Perry Miller and argue for "continuity": "Those who make a case for continuity describe Edwards's spiritual sense as the apprehension of a content that is already accessible and known through everyday experience.... Grace is sensible, not supersensible... Perry Miller originated this "continuous" interpretation of the spiritual sense..." (197). But of course, Miller's work has suffered criticism, particularly for his enthusiastic recasting of Edwards as an empirical psychologist in the Lockean mode. As James Hoopes puts it, Miller made "persistent attempts to make Edwards not only 'modern' but also a materialist like Miller himself" (856).

In contrast to Miller, McClymond argues, "Edwards sought duality without duplicity, and it is not surprising that his later readers have tended to lay hold of one or the other side of his formulations... He insisted on God's immediate presence to each believer and on the indispensability of divine grace. Yet, simultaneously he asserted that the spiritual sense was a kind of evidence for God's reality and that the perception of God's beauty and truth enabled the human mind to perceive truth and beauty wherever it appears" (197). Again, we find something like a synthesis of contrary terms. "Spiritual perception," according to McClymond, "links idea and emotion, the cognitive and the affective. It meshes experiential manifestation with philosophical reflection. It brings together God and nature" (216). This argument solves the continuity versus discontinuity

debate by robbing both “idea” and “emotion” of their distinct power, their difference. Edwards does not simply mesh the two terms together, finding one as a reflection of the other, but uses their attraction and repulsion to one another as a spiritual practice in itself, seeing the vacillation or re-entry (the *process* itself) of the excluded term as a reference to meaning or complexity, or, in Edwards’s own terminology, as a reference to God. The distinctions that Edwards makes are self-referential distinctions, taking on the character of a dialectic that refuses synthesis and persists in a kind of oscillation, an understanding of change or process as a continual exclusion and re-entry of one side. Edwards seeks unity as a spiritual practice, but only as the byproduct of the processional march of worldly differentiation, or, we might say, out of the corner of his eye.

As De Prosopo notes, many commentators find in the qualities of Edwards that suggest a spiritual search for unity also point the way towards the view of Edwards as a kind of Romantic. De Prosopo ably dismantles this argument, but it is in fact the echoes of romanticism that many scholars see in Edwards that point the way towards systems theory. As De Prosopo points out, Edwards has stark differences with the idea of “self-generation” that comes from the Romantics such as Hegel (74). Not in spite of this difference, but in fact because of it, is Edwards more easily connected with Luhmann’s systems theory. This is because while Luhmann’s theory is perhaps easily mistaken for having an identity with Romantic notions of self-generation, the entire theory is in fact founded on a system/environment *distinction*. The system, then, is *not* the environment, it is defined by this distinction, a radical difference not to be overcome by naturalism or organicism, and the system in fact discovers its own lack of foundation as necessary for it to exist at all, which is to say that the system discovers itself as fundamentally contingent all the way down. This is very different from a classically Romantic idea of a self-

grounding or self-generating whole because the system must simultaneously maintain both contact and difference with its environment; it is not identical even to itself.

Luhmann suggested that Romantic movements may be seen as grappling with a new understanding of autonomy, which may be better understood through the formal self-reference of a system/environment distinction: “The generalization of the concept and the structural problems of observing systems has far-reaching consequences, which only became apparent through mathematical analyses. This detour via mathematics frees us at the same time from the mystifications previously attached to concepts such as "meaning" (*Sinn*) or "mind" (*Geist*). They enable us to see today more clearly why and how something like "imagination" is required and in what sense construction/deconstruction/reconstruction as an ongoing process, an ongoing displacement of distinctions (Derrida's *différance*), is necessary in order to dissolve paradoxes in and as time” (“Redescription” 514). As Luhmann writes elsewhere, “The closure of the self-referential order is synonymous here with the *infinite openness of the world*” (*Social* 62). It is not the intent to submit Edwards as a proto-systems theorist anymore than a proto-Romantic, but to argue that his attempt to show that the world of creation is necessarily indebted to a Creator, which is to say that creation is founded upon an exclusion which it cannot see, can be more easily understood with the help of theories that deal explicitly with self-reference.

De Prosopo writes that for Edwards, “form in nature signifies a principle of order both superior and opposed to matter” (78). This agrees with the idea that Edwards is concerned for *forms*, an act of distinction that makes observation of the natural world (i.e., matter) possible by marking itself as different from what is observed. Through self-acknowledged limitation or closure a self-referential distinction refers to the intrinsically

chaotic character of nature that is reducible in itself to no forms, that is so exceedingly complex, so infinite, that it exists on another plain entirely from the observable world of forms. The infinite is not simply an extrapolation or extension of finite characteristics, but of another quality entirely. This suggests that the infinite, God, or the environment (whichever term seems most apt) can be most easily described as an undecidable state of pure possibility, in which multiple possibilities exist at the same time; in which, for instance, something can be both true *and* false (a God that can be the slowest, the fastest, the biggest and smallest). This realm, however, is not observable without a cut or distinction, without a form to reduce the complexity of the environment, and so it is not available for observation but persists, out of the corner of the observer's eye, as the infinite possibilities that must be occluded in order for an observation to actualize or determine what it is observing. As Perry Miller writes,

God did not create the world, said Edwards, merely to exhibit His glory; he did not create it out of nothing simply to show that He could: He who is Himself the source of all being, the substance of all life, created the world out of Himself by a diffusion of Himself into time and space. He made the world, not by sitting outside and above it, by modeling it as a child models sand, but by an extension of Himself, by taking upon Himself the forms of stones and trees and of man. He created without any ulterior object in view, neither for His glory nor for His power, but for the pure joy of self-expression, as an artist creates beauty for the love of beauty. God does not need a world or the worship of man; He is perfect in Himself. If He bothers to create, it is out of the fullness of His own nature, the overflowing virtue that is in Him (*Errand* 194).

The most ingenious aspect of this idea of Creation is that it suggests that God created the world as a means to actualize or further determine Himself through forms. In order for God to actualize the overdetermined possibilities that he represents as an omnipotent being he must differentiate Himself in forms as a way to realize Himself. This realization is not a limitation, however, because it allows for things to always be otherwise in the future. And it is this sense that God becomes both the first and last of Creation, the first cause and final actualization of the universe, “continually causing revolutions.”

The Nature of True Virtue

“’Tis no solid objection against God’s aiming at an infinitely perfect union of the creature with himself, that the particular time will never come when it can be said, the union now is infinitely perfect” (*Works* 8:536).

Edwards, and Puritan thought generally, think of the universe as a cascading series of “frames”—each descending frame a step further from Grace: “The being of God is diffused throughout Creation in regular stages, or, as Edwards terms them, ‘frames’ of existence. These frames ascend hierarchically according to the amount of divine being they contain” (De Prosopo 91). This informs what Edwards understands by “excellency” because while some idea of excellency may be perceived down here on the lower frames of existence, as when Edwards writes in *The Mind*, “All beauty consists in similarness of identity of relation” (*Philosophy* 23), true excellency is nevertheless constituted by a more general identity of relation, a larger framework: “As bodies are the shadows of being, so their proportions are shadows of proportion” (*Works* 6:335). And likewise, “The more the consent is, and the more extensive, the greater is the excellency” (*Works* 6:336).

How then may we perceive the greatest excellency? For Edwards this is only accomplished by consent to “being in general,” which is the greater harmony and symmetry of all being. Being in general is best understood as a self-referential concept, one that sees the *one-sidedness* of any distinction, its assymetrization or what Luhmann refers to as a “preference for one side over the other,” as occluding the unity of that distinction. As Edwards writes, “One alone without any reference to any more cannot be excellent; for, in such case, there can be no manner of relation no way, and therefore no such thing as consent. Indeed, what we call ‘one’ may be excellent because of a consent of parts, or some consent of those in that being that are distinguished into a plurality some way or other. But in a being that is absolutely without any plurality there cannot be excellency, for there can be no such thing as consent or agreement” (*Works* 6:337). One alone has no excellency because that quality grows only with the progress of consent, the relation of parts to a greater and greater whole. Edwards calls this progress “virtue” or “love,” which successively rises up from one frame to another, toward God: “For, so far as a thing consents to being in general, so far it consents to Him. And the more perfect created spirits are, the nearer do they come to their Creator in this regard” (*Works* 6:337).

In *The Nature of True Virtue*, Edwards lays out a perspective on being in general which, in Sharon Cameron’s reading, outstrips any possibility of virtue or love for a real human being, or any particular thing at all:

When Edwards defines ‘virtuous love’ as exempt from a private system, and defines a ‘private system,’ no matter how expansive, as anything less than what comprehends ‘the universality of existence’—when he insists moreover that all nonuniversal love ‘put in the scales with it, has no greater proportion to it’ than love for a single person (*W* 8:554)—it is safe to say that any person’s love is

excluded from qualifying as virtuous. Thus while Edwards deliberates the differences between a private system and a common morality, with its ever-enlarging circumference, he finally lumps these together, drawing a line between love based on any sense of exclusion (all love had by all persons) and that extended without limit everywhere. The latter—specified in this treatise by opposition, negation, and inference—repeatedly defined as what persons cannot muster, constitutes the only nontrivial principle of justice (32).

Cameron's interpretation of *The Nature of True Virtue* expertly points out what is most remarkable about it: Edward's definition of virtue seems to be devoid of any practical content. It seems to suggest that whatever one might do, towards whatever one might give love, no matter how wide and general a love it may be, it is not true virtue because it is limited or "nonuniversal." True virtue is forever distinct from worldly virtue. "Edwards is not proscribing what we can do. The impediment is part of the point" (28). The point being, by implication, our infinite distance from divine love: "The infinite is preserved as an ideal not in spite of our being unable to arrive at it, but precisely because we can't empirically arrive at it" (42).

There is perhaps another way to interpret *The Nature of True Virtue* as an innovative response to the classic part versus whole dilemma. Instead of an unimpeachable impediment, perhaps the difference between worldly and true virtue, between "private system" and "being in general," is something like a self-referential distinction, in which Edwards observes the ultimate unity of a distinction as the re-entry into the form of the divine, and thus the inescapable incompleteness, the onesidedness of any distinction. In *The Mind*, Edwards writes, "We have said already that it is naturally agreeable to perceiving being that being should consent to being, and the contrary, disagreeable. If by

any means, therefore, a particular and restrained love overcomes this general consent, the foundation of that consent yet remaining in the nature exerts itself again, so that there is the contradiction of one consent to another” (*Works* 6:365). The “foundation of that consent” represents the self-referential nature of a distinction, the inevitable re-entry into the form that exerts itself again. And in contrast to Cameron this passage suggests that for Edwards not only is it possible to engage in true virtue as a process, it is inevitable. We can’t help but do it. Following from this, it is possible to see that Edwards is defining virtue as a process of self-referential, self-overcoming re-entry.

Again it is Luhmann who can help us understand the distinction Edwards makes between private and general systems of virtue:

Communication systems develop a special way to deal with complexity, i.e. introducing a representation of the complexity of the world into systems. I call this representation of complexity “meaning”—avoiding all subjective, psychological or transcendental connotations of this term...The function of meaning is to provide access to all possible topics of communication. Meaning places all concrete items into a horizon of further possibilities and finally into the world of all possibilities. Whatever shows up as an actual event refers to other possibilities, to other ways of related actions and experience within the horizon of further possibilities. Each meaningful item reconstructs the world by the difference between the actual and the possible. Security, however, lies only in the actual. It can be increased only by indirection, by passing on to other meanings while retaining the possibility of returning to its present position. Again, a self-referential, recursive structure is needed to combine complexity and security (“Society” 7).

Luhmann describes religion as a system which takes upon itself the task of representing the unity of all distinctions to itself, and so it becomes a system in which the oscillations of self-reference are most acute. God is continually causing revolutions: “Religious forms incorporate, so to speak, paradoxical meanings; they differentiate religion against other fields of life; they involve the risk of refusal; they inaugurate deviant reproduction, i.e. evolution” (8). What Cameron correctly identifies in *True Virtue* as an impediment, what might be termed an uncrossable (or one-sided) boundary, can also be seen with the aid of Luhmann’s systems theory as a form of openness. This is, as Cary Wolfe has observed, the “openness from closure” principle: “the very thing that separates us from the world *connects* us to the world, and self-referential, autopoietic closure, far from indicating a kind of solipsistic neo-Kantian idealism, actually is generative of openness to the environment” (*Posthumanism* xxi). The impediment, in this manner, is the point.

The Nature of True Virtue, then, is Edwards’s most elaborate attempt to create what might be called an open-ended or process oriented ethics. Edwards makes a crucial distinction very early in *True Virtue*, “There is a general and particular beauty. By a particular beauty, I mean that by which a thing appears beautiful when considered only with regard to its connection with, and tendency to, some particular things within a limited, and as it were a private sphere. And a general beauty is that by which a thing appears beautiful when viewed most perfectly, comprehensively and universally, with regard to all its tendencies, and its connections with every thing to which it stands related” (*Works* 8:540). One may read this distinction as having no value for embodied and particular persons, but the sheer impossibility of grasping what Edwards identifies as general beauty can be overcome when it is identified as what Luhmann terms “meaning.” General beauty, then, represents the limitedness of any particular beauty, its

particularity or actuality, and thus acts as a reference to *further*, infinitely further, determinations of that beauty as part of a larger system of the world, “or beautiful in a comprehensive view” (*Works* 8:540). A particular object can be beautiful in *itself*, but only insofar as it references the unrepresentable whole, a crucial analogy for understanding what Edwards means by “true virtue,” which consists in *benevolence to being in general*” (*Works* 8:540). He goes on, “When I say true virtue consists in love to being in general, I shall not be likely to be understood, that no one act of the mind or exercise of love is of the nature of true virtue, but what has being in general, or the great system of universal existence, for its direct and immediate object: so that no exercise of love, or kind affection to any one particular being, that is but a small part of this whole, has any thing of the nature of true virtue” (*Works* 8:541). Any particular act is *asymmetrical* or one sided, and this imbalance leads it inevitably towards a larger symmetry or unity.

Edwards explicitly understands this process as circular: “If virtue consists primarily in love to virtue, then virtue, the thing loved, is the love of virtue: so that virtue must consist in the love of the love of virtue—and so on in infinitum. For there is no end of going back in a circle. We never come to any beginning or foundation; it is without beginning, and hangs on nothing” (*Works* 8:541). There is no end to the circle. Edwards continues, “Therefore, if the essence of virtue of beauty of mind lies in love, or a disposition to love, it must primarily consist in something *different* both from complacency, which is a delight in beauty, and also from any benevolence that has the beauty of its object for its foundation. Because ‘tis absurd to say that virtue is primarily and first of all the consequence of itself. For this makes virtue primarily prior to itself” (*Works* 8:541). The *difference* that Edwards speaks of can best be understood as a self-referential *distinction*, a kind of symmetry-breaking, which references Being by marking itself out as particular,

private, or individual. Particular manifestations of virtue are distinguished from true virtue in the manner of their singularity, which references the whole through its occlusion, what Luhmann calls a “system-internal unity of self-reference and external reference” (*Observations* 17).

We come back to where we started, and self-referential closure opens out on to the infinite possibilities of meaning, continually causing revolutions. Derrida’s words in *The Gift of Death*, a kind of cousin to *The Nature of True Virtue*, offer a useful comparison: “On what condition does goodness exist beyond all calculation? On the condition that goodness forget itself, that the movement be a movement of the gift that renounces itself, hence a movement of infinite love...I have never been and never will be up to the level of this infinite goodness nor up to the immensity of the gift, the frameless immensity that must in general define a gift as such” (51). And also: “I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others” (68). The frameless immensity appears within the frame as a *gift* for Derrida, an asymmetrical movement toward the other that erases itself, and for Edwards this is the nature of the love of virtue and thus the law of spiritual growth, raising us up towards grace, infinitely higher. He writes, “As to that excellence that created spirits partake of, that it is all to be resolved into love...that to love is to fulfill the royal law; and that all the law is fulfilled in this one word, love” (*Works* 6:364). Virtue is the unity, but not the identity, of the distinction between private and general systems, between part and whole. Virtue is the law of onwardness or futurity. It is the infinite within the finite and fallen systems of our love.

Chapter Four

Neither Here Nor There: Grief and Absence in Emerson's "Experience"

"Yesterday night, at fifteen minutes after eight, my little Waldo ended his life."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson (*Journals* 65)

"It seems as if I ought to call upon the winds to describe my boy, my fast receding boy, a child of so large & generous a nature that I cannot paint him by specialties, as I might another."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson (*Journals* 67)

"The movement of love is circular, at one and the same impulse projecting creations into independency and drawing them into harmony."

—Charles S. Peirce (EP1 353)

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote "Experience" (1844) after the death of his young son, a major dividing point in his life, and yet the essay is notorious for the fact that Emerson pointedly refuses to demonstrate his grief. Tellingly, he does not even name the child, preferring the generalized and even impersonal "my son" instead. It would seem, from his words and the cursory manner in which he treats it, that the loss does not affect him: "In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate,—no more" (*Prose* 200). He does not show the total devastation one expects from the death of a dear child. Instead, Emerson finds himself adrift on an ocean of names and signifiers that do not find their marks, and the claim in *Nature* that "words are signs of natural facts" (*Prose* 35) can no longer be sustained. In "Experience," Emerson is principally concerned with what could be called the faultiness of language, a constitutive inability to refer to a real and stable world ("natural facts") beyond the words themselves.

This manifests itself as a preoccupation with the act of naming, or pronouncing a name as an act of representation.

Not surprisingly, “Experience” is then often linked to a decisive shift away from the optimistic and affirmative transcendentalism of *Nature* (1836), in particular the idea that we are fundamentally at home in the world. In fact, it would seem that Emerson’s stance on naming does not differ in spirit from the Calvinist philosophy regarding representations of the natural world as well as metaphysical concepts. This applies especially and above all to the concept of God, as seen in the Puritan poet Edward Taylor’s lament: “Whether I speake, or speechless stand.../ I faile thy Glory” (qtd. in Bercovitch 21). Not only are these words an expression of the inadequacy of human language, they are also charged with the failure of an ethical duty to accurately represent that which is unrepresentable. Emerson’s silence can be seen to enact similar problems, with his prose continually hinting at what it cannot, will not, say: “An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with. Grief too will make us idealists” (*Prose* 199). If we cannot speak of that which is unspeakable, what can we say? Systems theorist Niklas Luhmann considers the problem under very nearly the same terms as Taylor: “The other possibility is silence—a silence that no longer wants to be understood as communication (but forever understood, is understandable only in this way). This does not only mean to opt for silence within the distinction between speaking and silence, but to avoid the distinction as such, so that the problem does not arise in the first place...But then, doesn’t one still have the problem that in a world in which one speaks, silence is possible only within self-drawn boundaries, i.e., as the production of difference?” (“Speaking and Silence” 27). Emerson’s silence would have it that his son is utterly lost along with the world itself, not to be recovered as known

even in grief. Yet, as Sharon Cameron's influential essay on "Experience" poignantly demonstrates, his silence speaks despite himself.

However, while the arguments of the present essay would not be possible without Cameron's important insights in "Representing Grief," I wish to depart slightly from her analysis of "Experience" in order to take Emerson more plainly at his word. Rather than read "Experience" as a "testament to the pervasiveness of a loss so inclusive that it is inseparable from experience itself," (Cameron 57) I take Emerson's claim that "I cannot get it nearer to me" (*Prose* 200) in reference to the loss of his son at face value. In retrospect, the breakthrough of Cameron's idea is that she provides the interpreter of "Experience" with the ability to see Emerson's grief everywhere at once in the text, and this liberates a potential for readers of "Experience" to incorporate into their interpretations exactly the thing that Emerson refuses to incorporate into his own essay. This is significant. If it is axiomatic for criticism that "every system excludes or expels something which does not let itself be thought within the terms of the system, and lets itself be fascinated, magnetized, and controlled by this excluded term, its transcendental's transcendental" (Bennington 284), then what Cameron brilliantly shows is that "Experience" is an essay *about* its excluded term.

Yet such an analysis occurs at the expense of a confrontation with the more radical effects of Emerson's denial of feeling. For Cameron, the dead son is not left behind or forgotten, but the reverse: grief is so substantially *present* that it stands behind every word in the essay, as if every word says the child's name, subsuming all particulars under a guiding, though paradoxically excluded, term. The particular experience of grief "migrates so that it is recognizable as the property of *all* experience independent of particularity" (xvii). Even the title of Cameron's essay, "Representing Grief," assumes the

very thing Emerson seems at pains to question. She rescues the son from the oblivion of death while Emerson seems only too willing to leave him there. Some of the force of Emerson's meaning is thereby lost if we accept wholesale Cameron's re-constitution of Emerson's absent grief, yet at the same time an understandable and unavoidable melancholic longing for the dead child persists in all subsequent readings of "Experience." In contrast to Cameron, Emerson's refusal of grief rejects any internalized representation of his son in favor of accepting his son, and therefore his relationship to his son, as external and independent from himself—such is the lesson of death. This interpretation reconciles Cameron's reading, her discovery of Emerson's grief within or behind his words, with the more explicit denials of grief found in the text, thus insisting that the excluded term remain excluded and unknown.

Michel Serres writes that, "Knowledge as such is a space of transformation," (73) and with that statement in mind, "Experience" may be approached through Charles S. Peirce's concept of Thirdness or semiosis. Peirce defines concepts or ideas as signs. That is, they are both *real*, contained within no particular mind, and *becoming*, thus always related to an undetermined future being, forever playing itself out as a relationship between the actual and the possible. As Peirce argued, the determinate meaning of any concept is always what the contingencies of our experience are moving towards: "The rational meaning of every proposition lies in the future" (EP2 340). Floyd Merrell puts it most ably, "...a sign, in order to be genuine, must be known, but in order to be known, the knower must have some inclination in terms of what it would be for the sign to remain unknown. In other words to know what a sign *is* entails knowing at least in part what it *is not*, but *might otherwise have been*. Without some inkling of the unknown and unactualized, whatever is known at a given moment would be no more than a self-

sufficient, unrelated whole” (29). What this means is that ideas and concepts, when seen as signs or Thirdness, take on a shadowy kind of character, they are neither here nor there. In defining truth, Peirce memorably states, “Truth is a character which attaches to an abstract proposition, such as a person might utter. It essentially depends upon that proposition’s not professing to be exactly true” (CP 5.564). This state of affairs, in which propositions are confronted with their own limitations, calls for an attempt to get beyond the traditional being/non-being binary that inhabits Western philosophy and replace it with a concept of contingency, what Luhmann calls “a third value of undeterminability” (*Observations* 46). What Max H. Fisch refers to as Peirce’s “triadic logic” is an attempt to accomplish exactly this. As Peirce puts it, “*Potentiality* is the absence of Determination (in the usual broad sense) not of a mere negative kind but a positive capacity to be Yea and to be Nay; not ignorance but a state of being...” (qtd. in Fisch 177).

From these foundations, it can be seen that “Experience” demonstrates the passage from a representational mode of philosophy to a semiotic one. This passage is mediated by a mood of intense grief for an object so conspicuous in its absence that it overflows and surges past the representational schemes demanded by mourning, only to come to rest finally as something external and independent from Emerson himself, forever outside his ideas of it. The idealism of a “glass prison” which permeates the opening pages of “Experience” gives way not to a strict classical realism but a semiotic understanding of the world as independent and undetermined, a realm of potential awaiting determination which is itself always limited and partial. Grief may make us idealists, but Emerson’s refusal of modern grieving practices leads us to semiotics.

In order to make this argument I will expand upon Cameron’s breakthrough essay on “Experience” by introducing a Derridean reading of the term “experience” as

aporia, thus connecting “Experience” to a notion of the liminal, or that which exists between. I will also understand Emerson’s suspicion of representation following the death of his son to be the result of his Calvinist inheritance of a suspicion of mourning, a discouragement of representation or naming of the dead. In order to make this connection I will compare Emerson’s text to the captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson, a powerful Puritan text of grief and homelessness, and in particular Mitchell Breitwieser’s provocative reading of it. Finally, with the framework made available by the introduction of the Calvinist material, I will argue that Emerson is ultimately reconciled to the loss of his son through an understanding of his son as a relation or sign in the Peircean sense, that is, both present and absent, neither mind-dependent nor mind-independent. This is somewhat like what Stanley Cavell observes in his essay on “Experience” as “an acceptance of separateness” (132) except that the separateness is itself a necessary condition for any attachment at all. Emerson’s loving achievement is to deny the introjection required by mourning (which would constitute a solipsistic idealism in regard to the dead) and eventually to allow his son to exist entirely separate from himself.

This strategy of reading “Experience” involves a kind of ventriloquism, a strategy of putting names into Emerson’s mouth to substitute for the name he will not speak himself. In place of the proper name which is withheld there is offered a series of necessarily inadequate substitutions, in particular Nietzsche, Freud, Derrida, Cameron, Rowlandson, and Peirce. Of course, these proper names bring along a context of associations and presuppositions that are less important for themselves than for their eventual displacement and substitution. In reading “Experience” this way, by mimicking Emerson’s relentless substitutions of the “Lords of Life,” it is hoped that the effect achieved will help to clarify the argument. Following the course of these names we will

find ourselves first on one side (an internalization of the lost object) and then on the other (an absolute rejection of internalization) in order to better grasp the middle ground pursued in “Experience.” This is a strategy that admits the necessity of binaries while at the same time using them to indicate what the law of the excluded middle leaves out, namely the exclusion itself. As Emerson writes, a final mysterious proclamation in an essay full of them, “the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power” (*Prose* 213). This is best understood as a conviction that the relationship between our words and concepts with the world itself is adequate, if only eventually.

Experience as Aporia

“You have no idea what you are experiencing; you run through life as if you were drunk and once in a while fall down a staircase. But thanks to your drunkenness, you don’t break your limbs in the process; your muscles are too slack and your head too dull for you to find the stones of these stairs as hard as the rest of us do! For us, life is a greater danger: we are made of glass – woe unto us if we bump against something! And everything is lost if we fall!”

—Nietzsche (132)

What is most vivid about this passage is the comic notion of life as *falling down stairs*, an image that forcefully suggests the treacherous danger of the ground beneath our feet. Very early in “Experience” there is a similar idea: “We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight” (*Prose* 198). A staircase evokes homelessness or tension because it represents a space without foundations. Staircases are liminal spaces, always between, areas of transition in which rest or stasis is impossible.

They are relational, as a line may be diagonal only in comparison to the straight or horizontal. They are temporary, as a staircase only begins on one level ground and ends on another, suspended in mid-air just as the staircase suspends, or places in suspense, those that traverse it.

Nietzsche's passage characteristically casts metaphysical confusion in terms of physical pain. Emerson, also characteristically, doesn't seem to recognize the threat of falling at all, and focuses instead on the dreamlike feeling that accompanies confusion: "All things swim and glitter. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception" (*Prose* 198). Indeed, Emerson seems to see the human condition as permanently drunk: "But the Genius which, according to the old belief, stands at the door by which we enter, and gives us the lethe to drink, that we may tell no tales, mixed the cup too strongly, and we cannot shake off the lethargy now at noonday" (*Prose* 198). The lethe (notably in Greek the opposite of *aletheia* or "to uncover") casts a shroud over all perception yet it also inebriates to the point that no pain is felt as we bump along our way. For Nietzsche, it is our sober commitment to truth that threatens our bones and our life, but Emerson's target in "Experience" is not so much the problem of truth but the threat of an enervating skepticism. Nietzsche's passage questions how one is to survive and navigate the staircases, the abyssal transitional moments between the level grounds of decision and action. For Emerson, the task is to cope with a permanent lack of foundation, on an infinite staircase with no level ground in sight.

Indulge me in imagining that Emerson sits dejected and sleepy on the staircase while Nietzsche wonders at his drunken imperviousness, his seeming invincibility, while passing by. Nietzsche's plurality of levels and truths belies Emerson's infinite transitional staircase. There is, however, a condition that provides for the possibility of inhabiting the

staircase as Emerson claims to, a state that presents the individual with the paradoxical situation of being *between* (or liminal) indefinitely. It is what Freud identifies as melancholia, a state closely connected to mourning. In melancholia, Freud writes, we find “profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of capacity to love, inhibition of all activity” (*Prose* 165)—all due to an inability to detach oneself from a lost object. With the melancholia that occurs in mourning, the loss of a loved one especially, we find a “loss of a capacity to adopt any new object of love, which would mean a replacing of the one mourned, the same turning from every active effort that is not connected with thoughts of the dead” (*Prose* 165). The melancholic individual cannot yet return to the world because the lost object persists as a kind of gap that cannot be papered over and therefore cannot ever be fully represented: “the patient cannot readily perceive what it is that he has lost” (*Prose* 166).

The proper course of mourning entails a finality and consummation to the project that finally lets go of the lost object by the accomplishment of introjection, the complete integration of a representation into the self. The subject may let go by taking only that part of the object that is *known* and finding the correct representation to take possession of. However, it is easy to imagine the loss of a young child, a being of limitless potential, as a loss especially difficult to mourn due to an inability to define or delimit just what was lost in all its future possibilities. Melancholic mourning, in contrast to successfully completed mourning, leads the subject to constitute the lost object as still somehow half-present, as conspicuous in its absence. In this case, mourning cannot be completed because there is no possibility for an adequate representation of the lost object, no correct name. As Cameron writes, “Emerson preserves the sanctity of his feeling, preserves by keeping

hidden or unconscious (that is, dissociated) his sorrow for the child, as if hidden the feeling escapes the words that debase it” (61).

Yet Cameron’s reading of “Experience,” while sensitive and nuanced, seems to me to make too strong a claim when she writes that the “...concerns in ‘Experience’ are all governed by Emerson’s relation to the dead child.” She claims that “Experience” is an elegy: “a powerful and systematic representation of grief” (56). Cameron argues that grief for the child is present and behind every word in the essay, and she reconciles this with Emerson’s explicit silence on the matter through the realm of the hidden or secret. Both the dead son and Emerson’s grief are present in the essay but hidden away in a secret place. This is a major breakthrough for understanding a notoriously difficult text, but I think it goes too far partly because it gives the lost object an unearned position of extreme prominence (though hidden, grief seems to be the main focus of “Experience” for Cameron) and most of all because it supposes that some form of adequate representation must be taking place. In fact, Emerson’s silence suggests that his grief for his son is definitely not *in* the essay but external to it—this is something other than a representation.

The most explicit philosophical theme of “Experience” is what Emerson calls “the secret of illusoriness” which derives from “the necessity of a succession of moods or objects.” Emerson also uses the vivid metaphor of a “glass prison” to describe a condition which brings a “vague guess at new fact” but “is nowise to be trusted as the lasting relation between that intellect and that thing” (*Prose* 202). He writes, “Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus. From the mountain you see the mountain” (*Prose* 200). Which is to say that from any particular mood or

perspective one may only see what that mood or perspective reveals. The boundaries between these points of observation are uncrossable yet visible; they are, to borrow from Jacques Derrida, aporias. An aporia is not so much the space *outside* a particular perspective (how would one know it is there?) but instead the inside mark of the boundary of that perspective's limit—an indication of the outside space. Derrida asks, "Can one speak—and if so, in what sense—of an *experience of the aporia*? An *experience of the aporia as such*? Or vice versa: Is an experience possible that would not be an experience of the aporia?" (*Aporias* 15) His questions are about the possibility of limit experiences, about the potential for *crossing over* the spaces between: "What would such an *experience* be? The word [experience] also means passage, traversal, endurance, and rite of passage, but can there be a traversal without line and without indivisible border?" (*Aporias* 15) Experience, in Derrida's reading, names the act of traversing the aporia, or confronting the limit of a mood's revealing powers, or holding still where one should not hold still, like a staircase:

It had to be a matter of the nonpassage, or rather from the experience of the nonpassage, the experience of what happens and is fascinating in this nonpassage, paralyzing us in this separation in a way that is not necessarily negative: before a door, a threshold, a border, a line, or simply the edge or approach as such. It should be a matter of what, in sum, appears to block our way or to separate us in the very place where *it would no longer be possible to constitute a problem*, a project, or a projection, that is, at the point where the very project or the problematic task becomes impossible and where we are exposed, absolutely without protection, without problem, and without prosthesis, without possible substitution, singularity exposed in our absolute and absolutely naked uniqueness, that is to say, disarmed,

delivered to the other, incapable even of sheltering ourselves behind what could still protect the interiority of a secret (*Aporias* 12).

The aporia exposes our absolute “singularity” which, in the terminology of *Being and Time*, is the anticipation of death. Derrida suggests an expansion of that idea: “If death names the very irreplaceability of absolute singularity (no one can die in my place or in the place of the other), then all the *examples* in the world can precisely illustrate this singularity. Everyone’s death, the death of all those who can say ‘my death,’ is irreplaceable” (*Aporias* 22). Emerson seemingly denies this very quality to his dead son, now no more than a lost “estate,--no more” (*Prose* 200). These seem to be callous words precisely because they deny Emerson’s unnamed son his singularity, his ability to say “my death.” Instead, it would seem Emerson is quite willing to usher his son, and his possession of whatever his son was, into a system of economic exchange where death is simply seen as a “bankruptcy”—a move which renders the child entirely replaceable, exactly the paradox which Derrida points to: every death is equally irreplaceable, and so any particular death is only as unique as every other. What is interesting about this strategy is that while it resists a modern approach to mourning—which creates the paradox Derrida describes—it also closely resembles a particularly radical strain of early modernist thought: Calvinism, most pertinently the early American Puritans.

In this way, Emerson’s lack of grief reflects the social taboo on excessive mourning or grief in Puritan culture. Of course, Emerson never became a Calvinist after abandoning Unitarianism, but “Experience” shows a turning in his thought, even if it were only relegated to a few sentences: “It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery that we have made, that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man” (*Prose* 209). I take these words to be an admission that Emerson now accepts at least a

notion of original sin, even if only in the sense of an unbridgeable separation of man and nature. He writes, “I know that the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not the world I *think*. I observe that difference and shall observe it. One day, I shall know the value and law of this discrepancy” (*Prose* 212). The question of how one can observe a difference (the different *itself*?) brings us once again to the brink of an aporia. What else is the sign of the discrepancy but the limit hinting at what is unrepresentable? Most of all, these declarations show Emerson abandoning any notion of adequate representation and replacing it with difference.

Despite Emerson’s Unitarian past, critics often cite him as an example (usually along with Melville) as a thinker who attempts to represent in his writing the chaotic God of Calvinism. Perry Miller’s influential work on Puritanism provides an ideal departure, then, for discovering the Puritan elements in Emerson’s suppression of mourning. As Miller sums up the Puritan intellectual experience in “The Marrow of Puritan Divinity”:

Here, then, was the task which seventeenth-century Calvinists faced: the task of bringing God to time and to reason, of justifying His ways to man in conceptions meaningful to the intellect, of caging and confining the transcendent Force, the inexpressible and unfathomable Being, by the laws of ethics, and of doing this somehow without losing the sense of the hidden God, without reducing the Divinity to a mechanism, without depriving Him of unpredictability, absolute power, fearfulness, and mystery. In the final analysis this task came down to ascertaining the reliability of human reason and the trustworthiness of human experience as measurements of the divine character—in short, to the problem of human comprehension of this mysterious thing which we today call the universe (*Errand* 56).

This description of the task of Calvinism obviously shares much with the descriptions of “Experience” offered above. But perhaps what’s most important in this passage is the notion that the Puritans attempted to stay loyal to a God that surpasses human understanding. Human rationality can make some sense of the world, but for the Puritan there is always a “left over” that makes itself felt somehow. The task of Calvinism, if we follow Miller, was to mark the discrepancy between the world as it is and the world as we think it; our observations are all incomplete, and necessarily so in our sinfulness. The flaw in our perception, to use Emerson’s term, is reflected in our mortality, in death, the ultimate presence of sin according to Gordon Geddes: “In their experience of death, the Puritans found themselves face to face with the original curse” (155).

Beyond philosophical affinities, Emerson’s debt to Puritanism is most clear in his denial or suppression of mourning. As Ronald Bosco points out in the introduction to a volume of New England funeral sermons, “Owing partially to the sheer presence of death in the New England landscape, the Puritan was not much moved or struck by death as a fact. Confirming him in what may seem to twentieth-century readers to be an excessively cold or casual attitude toward death was the instruction in the ways of death that he received from the pulpit. Except to acknowledge the passing of New England’s most illustrious men...the Puritan ministry positively discouraged, and during the 1640s and 1650s civil law forbade, public notice of death in any significant way” (ix). In addition, there was a “prohibition against speaking the name of the dead by others outside the family during the period of mourning” (Geddes 165). According to Bosco, the typical Puritan funeral went like this: “A person died, was wrapped in whatever goods might be available for that purpose, was carried away by a few relatives or friends, and was buried without ceremony in a shallow and often unmarked grave” (x). To do much more was

seen as blasphemous and a “misapplication of emotion” (x). In practical terms, these practices were in place to keep people *working*, since to fall into prolonged periods of grief would render one unable to work and so threaten the survival of the community. The conditions of survival, the harsh violence and natural hardships of the strange environment that the typical Puritan had to contend with made them acutely aware of the tenuousness of any intimate relationship. Furthermore, the emphasis on the survival of the community (the “shining city on a hill”) at the expense of any particular individual coupled with the overall denigration of all things “worldly” pointed out quite forcefully the irrelevance of any one death within the larger scheme. As Geddes and Bosco both repeatedly point out, to grieve too much, or too emphatically, was to publicly question God’s plan.

In *Welcome Joy*, Geddes writes, “In mourning, as in other areas of Puritan life, the goal was not repression but control, or, as they termed it, moderation...the goal of mourning was triumphant affirmation of God’s will, but the path began with the harsh reality of death as an evil” (156). Grief and mourning, to the extent that they overstep the bounds of moderation set by Puritan society, must be suppressed, and pushed underground to a private realm of sinfulness. Public rites of mourning gave little thought for the individual who died: “The major themes explored in these expressions of public mourning focused on either the blessedness to be enjoyed by saints after death or on the lesson that death should hold for the living” (162). There was no remembrance for the names of the dead. According to Mitchell Breitwieser, the Puritan approach to these matters was

...In large measure an attempt to sublimate mourning, to block and then redirect its vigor to various social purposes: to sublimate something, one must start by

encouraging it to be, to consolidate its vigor, before appropriating it; but such cultivation risks the possibility that the sublimated thing might remain in itself, rather than accept transference to the proffered sublimatory surrogate; and, in the case of mourning, such a failure of sublimation would be antithetical to the ideology that seeks to appropriate it, because mourning is a project of constructing a personally sufficient memory of what has died, and thus tends to show a certain stubbornness when required to view the dead and the death clear specimens of a general moral type (9).

What this suggests is that the “sublimatory surrogate” is subject to a potential for failure, an inability to contain or constrain its object. On this reading, Emerson’s denial of grief for his son, along with the refusal to *name* his son (and that the son is so quickly passed over and seemingly forgotten), is paradoxically evidence of encouragement and appropriation in Breitwieser’s sense. On this reading, Emerson’s unnamed son, as Stanley Cavell summarizes Sharon Cameron, is “not forgotten but generates the ensuing topics of the essay, which is thus a testament to his consuming loss” (*Transcendental* 116). Emerson’s suppression of grief would then become the force that propels “Experience” into existence.

As we’ve seen, for modern psychoanalysis the goal of mourning is an introjection of the lost object. For Calvinism, by contrast, the goal was detachment from worldly things in favor of a biblical typology—a rejection of the temptations of a private internalized subject in favor of the shared meaning of the community. The difference is between a thoroughly modern idealism—which removes the world but in return provides the relatively stability and knowledge of one’s own mind—and a pre-modern suspicion of subjectivity as the seat of sin. The Puritan, on the precipice of modernity, is faced with the

emergence of the modern subject on the one hand, and on the other with the terrors of an outside world symbolically represented by the chaotic wilderness of a new uncivilized continent. There is literally nowhere to turn to beyond God's grace. The individual Puritan was placed in a situation that encouraged and appropriated the emergence of the modern subject but at the same time attempted to harness and control that emergence for the greater community—exactly as Miller's quotation above points out. "Experience," however, embraces the Puritan suspicion of mourning without recourse to the dualisms of Calvinism as documented by Breitwieser, Miler, and scholars such as Sacvan Bercovitch. Emerson does not achieve a modern psychoanalytic catharsis as per Cameron, nor does he surrender himself to skepticism. What Emerson achieves, then, is a middle way. Perhaps the best way to make sense of this is by comparing "Experience" to an early American text that deals powerfully, if also indirectly, with mourning: Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative.

In 1676, Rowlandson was taken captive by the Pocasset Indians during King Philip's War, in the process losing several family members, including a six-year-old daughter named Sarah who is never actually named in the narrative itself. Rowlandson's account of these events helped establish the genre of the American captivity narrative as studied so famously by Richard Slotkin, among many others. A standard interpretation of Rowlandson's narrative might see it as a typically pious and homiletic Puritan text written under the strict direction of Puritan minister Cotton Mather. However, Breitwieser's *American Puritanism and the Defense of Mourning* seeks to reinterpret Rowlandson's narrative as "among the more intense and unremitting representations of experience as a collision between cultural ideology and the real in American literature before Melville" (4).

Breitwieser argues that Rowlandson's grief for her recently deceased daughter disrupts the Puritan typology she has been instructed to apply to her experience. The singularity of what she mourns places itself outside all systems of meaning available to her. This situation not only isolates and individuates Rowlandson, it also allows her to encounter the possibility of a space outside traditional typologies, especially in her encounters with Indians. Mourning *unfixes* the structures of Rowlandson's perception and allows her to experience the Indian as a true human other "at the margin of perception" (132). It creates for her not a new system of meaning, but a limit or boundary (an *aporia*) for the meanings she attempts to apply to her experience. It foregrounds the lost object, which then becomes the unthought or unseen of every system of meaning. Strangely, this quality of mourning arises mostly *because* of the Puritan injunction against it; it is already "outside" any accepted code of right behavior, and thus, when it arises of its own accord, it bears witness to that outside. Again, the aim of the Puritans was not to eliminate mourning but to control it, to erect a boundary not to be crossed. The inevitable outcome of this strategy is that mourning will bring into view the boundary and therefore indicate an outside, thereafter identified with sin and death. Breitwieser writes, "With the assistance of narratives such as Rowlandson's, Puritanism could once again govern by virtue of explanatory cogency, the entire range of human experience: nothing was outside of it; there was nothing that happened that was not a clear *example*" (8). None of this is possible, of course, if there is not that which can be targeted as something that is *not* an example, something clearly anomalous which can then be assimilated and brought into the fold of Puritan typology. "For the Puritan's themselves, there was an *other-to-the-type* that, though it could be labeled sin or error, was nonetheless a real factor in signification, and had considerable force" (24). In other words, Puritan hermeneutics was the

systematic detection and elimination of singularity, but with the existence of such singularities (objects outside systematized meaning) being a necessary part of the typology. For there to be an “inside” there must be an “outside”—and from the inside the border is always visible.

What then of the ultimate singularity? “Death, then, is to be a lesson in the protocols of perception: it teaches that the gross is really a shadow, that the lost object is not in itself of note, an embodiment of value, but rather an accommodation (commodity) of a transcendental value, a luminescence, certainly, to the rude mind, but, from the highest perspective, a color laid over truth” (22). This is the ultimate task of Puritan hermeneutics, and Emerson’s essay as well. How does one take the death of the other, the ultimate singularity, and bring it into the fold of generalized, systematized, and iterable meaning? This is the heart of Rowlandson’s narrative purpose as well as the aporetic limit upon which Puritanism defines its boundaries. As Rowlandson writes near the end of her story, by way of conclusion: “Our family being now gathered together (those of us that were living)...” (Vaughn & Clark 74). The clause divides itself in two, one part typical of the redemptive typology she assigns to her narrative, the other tellingly a parenthetical (and so outside the official meaning), indicating what is left out or passed over. It does not, however, *name* what is left out; it uses the incompleteness of what’s included to indicate its own limits.

As Breitwieser interprets the Puritan diagnosis of human suffering: “we are afflicted by loving too much” (117). The only recourse in such a state of affairs is to deny love in order to prevent or forestall mourning. This is, in philosophical terms, a form of skepticism: “Skepticism, were it within range, would sacrifice happiness to gain freedom from fright—a bargain, it seems to a still grieving self, because the better part of

happiness lies back in the past anyway” (186). If, as Stanley Cavell has argued, “Experience” is an encounter with skeptical idealism in the Kantian tradition, then the bargain of skepticism would be what Emerson makes in “Experience.” Even more extremely, the impossibility of mourning, of remembering a singularity, would be what Emerson expresses, the fact that the death of his son brings home—since there is no such possible attachment the pain that skepticism protects one from is impossible anyway. Emerson cannot protect himself from the loss of his son without losing the world his son was a part of as well. “Experience” would then simply be a testament to the absolute distance of the world, where even grief is out of reach—a testament that serves to reinforce both modern idealism and the terrors of skepticism.

But such a conclusion is exactly what “Experience” resists. Despite the overwhelming pressures of grief (“Grief too will make us idealists”), Emerson’s project, especially in the latter portions of the essay, is to deny idealism while acknowledging the distance between thought and reality. What is the measure of the discrepancy that Emerson speaks of? It can be expressed theoretically through Peirce’s triadic understanding of semiotics and its suggestion of a universe of relations that are neither mind-independent nor mind-dependent, but of a potential or contingent character, a Thirdness, or “in futuro.” Peirce writes,

If you ask what mode of being is supposed to belong to an idea that is in no mind, the reply will come that undoubtedly the idea must be embodied (or ensouled; it is all one) in order to attain complete being, and that if, at any moment, it should happen that an idea,—say that of physical decency,—was quite unconceived by any living being, then its mode of being (supposing that it was not altogether dead) would consist precisely in this, namely, that it was about to receive embodiment

(or ensoulment) and to work in the world. This would be a mere potential being, a being *in futuro*; but it would not be the utter nothingness which would befall matter (or spirit) if it were to be deprived of the governance of ideas, and thus were to have no regularity in its action, so that throughout no fraction of a second could it steadily act in any general way. For matter would thus not only not actually exist; but it would not have even a potential existence; since potentiality is an affair of ideas. It would be just downright Nothing (EP2 123).

This suggests that the faultiness of a representation is a reflection of the fact that as an idea or concept it is a sign that stands for something *other than itself* and so its constitutive inadequacy is merely its defacement of itself for that which it is pointing to, and most importantly this process only leads, as Peirce often points out, to another sign. Thus our thinking takes on a developmental character, a kind of forward momentum: “So, then, the essence of Reason is such that its being never can have been completely perfected. It always must be in a state of incipency, of growth.” (EP2 225). In Emerson’s words, “This onward trick of nature is too strong for us” (*Prose* 202).

Peirce famously wrote, “all this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs,” (CP 5.448n) and this is perhaps most poetically reflected by the sliding, swimming, glittering words of Emerson’s prose in the opening pages of “Experience.” In perhaps the most quoted passage of the essay, Emerson vividly depicts a world of shifting appearances: “I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition” (*Prose* 200). In the closing pages, however, a different tone is struck. Names fail, our words recede from the objects they point too, and in this process it can feel as if our handle on the solid, real, and graspable world is precarious or

even non-existent. But, if we are careful to pay attention, we find ourselves not isolated in innavigable seas, but interminable oceans of signification. Where words do not necessarily find their homes, but continually fall away from what they signify to reveal the universe.

When contemporary semiotician John Deely writes, "...at the heart of semiotics is the realization that the whole of human experience, without exception, is an interpretive structure mediated and sustained by signs" (*Basics* 5) it helps to clarify the nature of the prose in "Experience." Signs slip and slide around, meaning is elusive, but things *happen*. Our connection to the world is real, but not in the sense of grasping or holding something *outside*. We do not hold an adequate picture of the world in our mind, and for his part Emerson peers into the gap between representations and reality: "We do not see directly, but mediately..." (*Prose* 209). Only when we fail to note that ideas and concepts deface themselves in service of what they point to do we fall prey to idealism. Signs continually lead us back to the world (of signs).

It is the sense of the sign as existing not beyond but in an aporetic sense *between* dyadic categories—neither ideal nor real, neither being nor non-being—that best describes the role of Emerson's son in "Experience." Emerson's loss does not touch him because his idea of himself as a father is not intrinsic to his being. Indeed, if it were then Emerson's self identity would be in question once this critical notion of being a father is removed. One might assume that if the child can die and the man still stands, then the child was an inessential part of the man, or "caducous" as Emerson puts it. And while Emerson affirms this interpretation at points, it comes across as the vestigial remnants of the individualism of essays like "Self-Reliance." The death of the child serves as a challenge to his earlier philosophy. The question at issue is, as John Deely writes in a different context, "When a child dies, in what sense is the child's parent a parent?" (*Basics*

36) In what sense are our relationships and connections to the world real if they are only transient? If one subscribes to a traditional view of subject and object (wherein a subject represents an object to itself), the only response to death is skepticism and idealism. But “Experience” eventually shows a transition from representationalism to Peirce’s triadic semiotics enacted in Emerson’s wrestling with the paradoxes of idealism. How can the world be in my head, and yet my head be in the world? As Emerson writes: “What help from thought? Life is not dialectics. We, I think, in these times, have had lessons enough of the futility of criticism...Intellectual tasting of life will not supersede muscular activity...Do not craze yourself with thinking, but go about your business anywhere. Life is not intellectual or critical, but sturdy” (*Prose* 203). The mystery continuously marveled at in “Experience” is the difference between the encroaching threat of idealism and the “sturdy” reality that seems to happen anyway. The final pages of “Experience” best demonstrate Emerson’s burgeoning semiotics, despite his more explicit claims to idealism or even solipsism: “Thus inevitably does the universe wear our color, and every object fall successively into the subject itself” (*Prose* 210). In contrast, Emerson states, “So it is with us, now skeptical, or without unity, because immersed in forms and effects all seeming to be of equal value, and now religious, whilst in the reception of spiritual law” (*Prose* 207). This vacillation that we suffer contains the pain and grief of our losses as well as the joy of our attachments—all transient, passing, between.

Emerson’s refusal to grieve sets him apart even from Rowlandson. Her inability to openly grieve forces mourning underground, to a private place that represents the necessary *aporia* or paradox in Puritan thought—it creates a boundary with two sides, a dualism between private and public, man and God, and finally between ourselves and the world. Emerson, on the other hand, complicates these dualisms by choosing not to grieve

in order to preserve the singular memory of his son without representation—a present absence: “We must hold hard to this poverty, however scandalous,” (*Prose* 211) as he reminds us near the end of the essay. More clearly he writes, “Skepticisms are not gratuitous or lawless, but are limitations of the affirmative statement, and the new philosophy must take them in, and make affirmations outside of them, just as much as it must include the oldest beliefs” (*Prose* 209).

If we see that Emerson states as early as *Nature*: “I am nothing; I see all,” (*Prose* 29) or in *Circles*: “I am God in Nature, I am a weed by the wall,” (*Prose* 176) we can already see him attempting to reconcile the paradoxes of idealism, the sense of all the world falling into the subject, yet the persistence of a sturdy reality despite that. The vacillation of power and powerlessness, of sight and blindness: “To-day, I am full of thoughts...but yesterday, I saw a dreary vacuity in this direction in which I now see so much” (*Prose* 176). In “The Poet,” he writes, “For poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings, and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word, or a verse, and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem” (*Prose* 185). Such sentiments express the distorting power of expression, in which every statement somehow “miswrites” the perfect original. In “Experience” the generative power of these paradoxes begins to present itself: only by observing our separateness (“discrepancy”) from Nature is a union with it possible. Only through a miswriting is any writing possible. The problem of “Experience” is not the absolute distance of the world, but the fact that it is sometimes near and sometimes far. That which is nearest and dearest to us, that which seems to be most irreducibly *present*, can fall away.

The essay itself is constructed to mirror this back-and-forth vacillation. It is a series of affirmations buried in negations and vice versa, with the disillusionment of the opening paragraphs giving way to an expectantly victorious embrace of the universe in the conclusion. The professions of his son's abstractness in the early parts of "Experience" only serve to suggest his singularity as a shadow which trails the rest of the essay. Likewise, the affirmations that appear throughout the essay are haunted by their negation. For is not the lost object the generative condition of affirmations? Why else is there a need for affirmation unless something required affirming—as if it cannot stand on its own? And does not affirming "new creation" merely repeat the act of mourning by inscribing in each new creation what is lost, the originary "defeat"? Surely to designate it as "new" includes knowledge of what is now "old," what is lost, left behind, yet not forgotten? All new philosophies "must include the oldest beliefs", even if barely acknowledged. Emerson finds that "An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with," but is not the infinite waters between the self and the other what makes the cherishing love of something beyond the self possible? If it were not so, Emerson would merely love his idea of his son, and not his son. And so love is imbued with loss and distance. It does not bind, but pushes and pulls.

He can appropriate his son as an idea in his head, belonging alone to him and to perish when he perishes, or he can cast his son into an outside world which cannot ever be known or touched. He chooses a middle way: somewhere between, liminal, as on a staircase. To what extent is the parent of a dead child still a parent? Deely writes, "If the child dies, the physical relation between them ceases, but it remains that the erstwhile parents must be *thought of* as having been the parent of that child if the parent is to be understood according to the full extent of its intelligible being" (*Basics* 41). Who is made to

think about it, beyond Emerson himself? As stated above, a melancholic longing for the dead son persists in all readings of “Experience”—a loss is felt, and thought about, a sign carries an inexhaustible well of potentiality forward into the future, inhabitant of no particular mind. It is no secret grief that we feel at Emerson’s loss, it is more without us than within. “Experience,” and this is to the credit of her achievement, then becomes exactly the memorial Cameron proclaims it to be, but only to the extent that the reader connects the dots, and observes what remains outside the text. Emerson’s relation to his dead son survives even his own death by his refusal of introjection and representation—and thus the relation, and the child it points to, is continuously affirmed and acknowledged in his absence *as* the absence that makes presence possible.

Throughout the pages of “Experience” Emerson repeatedly comes back to the always inadequate task of naming: “In our more correct writing, we give to this generalization the name of Being, and thereby confess that we have arrived as far as we can go. Suffice it for the joy of the universe, that we have not arrived at a wall, but at interminable oceans” (*Prose* 208). This is not containment, but expansion. The innavigable sea has become interminable oceans, bursting out from inside itself, metamorphosing of its own accord from melancholy disillusionment to joyful hope, and back again, inevitably. An ocean of unsteady signs. And: “Illusion, Temperament, Succession, Surface, Surprise, Reality, Subjectiveness,--these are the threads on the loom of time, these are the lords of life. I dare not assume to give their order, but I name them as I find them in my way” (*Prose* 212). And finally, “Fortune, Minerva, Muse, Holy Ghost,--these are quaint names, too narrow to cover this unbounded substance. The baffled intellect must still kneel before this cause, which refuses to be named, --ineffable cause, which every fine genius has essayed to represent by some emphatic symbol, as,

Thales by water, Anaximenes by air, Anaxagoras by thought, Zoroaster by fire, Jesus and the moderns by love: and the metaphor of each has become a national religion” (*Prose* 208).

If not one of these names, this obsession with naming, ever suffices, then perhaps the only name that matters, that which finally identifies what is lost—the “ineffable cause,” pure potential, pure absence—is that name which for the sake of a grief stricken love is never spoken and always withheld, always deferred as the displacement at the heart of signification. It is worth comparing Emerson’s words to Derrida, yet again: “There will be no unique name, even if it were the name of Being” (*Margins* 27). But *eventually*, as our names tend to under and overshoot their targets, there is finally recognition in the action of a kind of exclusion of the middle; there is recognition by displacement or substitution, surely the only kind of recognition that is adequate solely by admitting its inadequacy or failure. Then onward, “Onward and onward!” (*Prose* 209)—with the next name, the next substitution, toward the name that cannot yet be said. As Derrida puts it in *The Gift of Death*, the deferral of a sign—that a sign forgets itself, erases itself at the same time that it gives itself—all this takes on the character of an Abrahamic sacrifice: “God decides to *give back*, to give back life, to give back the beloved son, once he is assured that a gift outside of any economy, the gift of death—and of the death of that which is priceless—has been accomplished without any hope of exchange, reward, circulation, or communication” (96). That is why Emerson can say in another essay, “With thought, with the ideal, is immortal hilarity, the rose of joy. Round it all the Muses sing. But grief cleaves to names, and persons, and the partial interests of to-day and yesterday” (*Essays* 328). It is in this context that Emerson’s closing sentence finally begins to resonate: “Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat: up again, old heart! -- it

seems to say, -- there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power.” (*Prose* 213).

And this statement resonates in turn with Peirce, using words that may console a grieving heart: “Thus, whether you accept the opinion or not, you must see that it is a perfectly Intelligible opinion that ideas are not all mere creations of this or that mind, but on the contrary have a power of finding or creating their vehicles, and having found them, of conferring upon them the ability to transform the face of the earth...They have life, generative life” (EP2 123).

Chapter Five

Every Language is Foreign: Self & Cybernetics in Peircean Semiosis

“What distinguishes a man from a word? There is a distinction doubtless...Man makes the word, and the word means nothing which the man has not made it mean, and that only to some man. But since man can think only by means of words or other external symbols, these might turn round and say: ‘You mean nothing which we have not taught you, and then only so far as you address some word as the interpretant of your thought.’ In fact, therefore, men and words reciprocally educate each other, each increase of a man’s information involves and is involved by, a corresponding increase of a word’s information.”

—Charles S. Peirce (EP1 54).

“One of the most extreme and most lamentable of my incapacities is my incapacity for linguistic expression...I have suffered grievously from it since childhood; and I cannot tell you how assiduously I have laboured to overcome it. I myself am conscious of the badness of my style, although I am probably not fully conscious of it. I can imagine one of my readers saying to another ‘Why can he not express himself naturally?’ I can supply the answer to that. It is because no linguistic expression is natural to him. He never thinks in words, but always in some kind of diagrams. He is always struggling with a foreign language; for him, every language is foreign.”

—Charles S. Peirce (MS 632, 5-7; qtd in Freadman 252).

If we take him at his word, Peirce evidently felt he lacked natural expression, a phrase immediately legible to his contemporaries as belonging to a metaphysical convention that identifies the subject with voice, that the power of having a self is the power of language. Jacques Derrida’s description of this tradition is most appropriate: “Natural writing is immediately united to the voice and to breath....There is therefore a good and a bad writing; the good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and the soul; the perverse and artful is technique, exiled in the exteriority of the body” (*Grammatology* 17). This includes the idea that one may simply access the power of

expression as the consequence of having a self at all, as when one stands awkwardly on a dance floor and is told to “just feel it.” Peirce’s incapacity to dance the dance of language points then to a more fundamental incapacity of *selfhood*, one that surfaces again and again in his writing, not least in his frequent bracing pronouncements that the self is merely a “negation”—of no substance or value in itself but only as the other to the iterative formation of habits he called Thirdness: “The individual man, since his separate existence is manifested only by ignorance and error, so far as he is anything apart from his fellow, and from what he and they are to be, is only a negation” (EP1 55). When Peirce looks inside himself he doesn’t find his voice, the presence of his true inner self, but the mechanizations of diagrams, one might say the blueprint of a machine rather than the evidence of a soul. Even in a moving admission of his own perceived shortcomings, a confession that cannot help but carry the weight of the tragedy of Peirce’s entire life and the unending series of missed opportunities and unfulfilled potential that mark his philosophy as a magnificent edifice in perpetual disarray, as if it were being built and torn down all at once—as *I* becomes *He*, the lament becomes the symptom, and Peirce manages to lose himself, to lose his *self*. He never thinks in words.

Even as generous and patient a benefactor as William James would fault Peirce for his impersonal style of expression, and it is no wonder that an author endowed with the very gift that Peirce lacked would, in his exasperation for Peirce’s (lack of) style, ask Peirce to express himself naturally, without technical baggage: “Your intensely mathematical mind keeps my non-mathematical one at a distance” (*Reasoning* 12). Intending to steer Peirce towards a style that would be more conducive to having and keeping a broad popular audience, and thus provide him with the stable employment that eluded him for most of his life, James often encouraged Peirce to avoid logic and mathematics, the two

subjects Peirce considered himself most engaged in. Told by James that he is “teeming with ideas” (*Reasoning* 25), Peirce’s characteristically testy response is most telling: “My philosophy, however, is not an ‘idea’ with which I ‘brim over’; it is a serious research to which there is no royal road” (*Reasoning* 26). It is possible to see in this exchange a conflict about what and where ideas are, seemingly a topic that the two fathers of pragmatism could be expected to agree upon. The difference is important: why is the supreme source of power and vitality for James seen by Peirce as a “negation?” James writes in *The Principles of Psychology*, “It seems as if the elementary psychic fact were not *thought* or *this thought* or *that thought*, but *my thought*, every thought being *owned*....On these terms the personal self rather than the thought might be treated as the immediate datum in psychology” (qtd. in Colapietro 63). A Peircean response would surely resemble the following: “Few things are more completely hidden from my observation than those hypothetical elements of thought which the psychologist finds reason to pronounce ‘immediate’ in his sense” (CP 8.144). Peirce is not able to *own* his thoughts, they are foreign at the moment of inception, given over to the iterative cycles of semiosis. He rejects the personal self of James, and suggests instead a distinction between a thought as the possession of a self and “research” as the investigation of some outside, some kind of externality. Peirce’s research represents the “bad” kind of writing because it does not issue forth from the heart and soul, but in the exteriority of the body, in the interaction of a tool or instrument with its object.

It is especially interesting that Peirce imagines the call to language as the call of the other to express or account for himself, even inhabiting the voice of that other in order to diagnose his own failures. As Derrida writes, “The beginning word is understood, in the intimacy of self-presence, as the voice of the other and as

commandment” (*Grammatology* 17). Not only that, for Peirce the call to language is seen as an *incapacity* of selfhood before the law. In “What Pragmatism Is” Peirce asserts that “a person is not absolutely an individual. His thoughts are what he is ‘saying to himself,’ that is, is saying to that other self that is just coming into life in the flow of time” (EP2 338).

Peirce does not state that the individual is this flow of consciousness or internal conversation, but quite clearly that the individual is *nothing*, error or falsity if perceived. The self, in this scheme, is called to being by the other, by the other others in the form of a community (even if it be a community of selves) or commandment in the paradoxical movement of a negation:

When we come to study the great principle of continuity and see how all is fluid and every point directly partakes the being of every other, it will appear that individualism and falsity are one and the same. Meantime, we know that man is not whole as long as he is single, that he is essentially a possible member of society. Especially, one man’s experience is nothing, if it stands alone. If he sees what others cannot, we call it hallucination. It is not “my” experience, but “our” experience that has to be thought of; and this “us” has indefinite possibilities (CP 5.402 n2).

Called to being through a call to language, perhaps even by language *itself* as the other, a commandment to respond and account for oneself, the individual only finds himself paradoxically through an incapacity of selfhood. He is a negation if alone, but does this not imply that the other cannot be an individual either? This would fully overturn the American tradition of what Perry Miller called a desire to confront divinity “face to face,” and connects Peirce with an alternative posthumanist tradition epitomized by Emerson’s notion of the “impersonal.” Wouldn’t this facelessness of the other in the form of

language or community need to be more, or less, than human? As Derrida puts it, “Must not this place of the Other be ahuman? If this is indeed the case, then the ahuman or at least the figure of some—in a word—*divinanimality*, even if it were to be felt through the human, would be the quasi-transcendental referent, the excluded, foreclosed, disavowed, tamed, and sacrificed foundation of what it founds, namely, the symbolic order, the human order, law and justice” (*Animal* 132). If already we have seen that sacrifice take the figurative form of a son (as for Emerson), or true virtue as the foundation of any actual virtue (as for Jonathan Edwards), then for Peirce it would seem to be the self and voice that is sacrificed. Could a fundamental incapacity or negation even precede the self it is supposed to express? It is worth quoting Derrida at length on the metaphysical tradition of selfhood:

This presence to oneself, this self of the presence to itself, this universal and singular “I” that is the condition for the response and thus for the responsibility of the subject—whether theoretical, practical, ethical, juridical, or political—is a power, a *faculty* that Kant is prudent or bold enough not to identify with the power *to speak*, the literal power of *uttering* “I.” This personal subject *is capable* of its selfness, is capable of doing it without saying it, if I can say so; it can affirm itself in its selfness and in its dignity, which is to say its *responsibility*, its power to respond, to answer for itself, before others and before the law, “even when he cannot yet say ‘I’” He has this “I” in his thinking, and that defines thinking itself as what gathers itself, there where it remains the same, gathered and present to itself through this power of the *I*, through the *I can* of this *I*, this *I can I* as an “I think” that accompanies every representation. Even where the ipseity of the I cannot speak itself and utter itself as such in the world *je, Ich, I, ego*, it *effects itself* in every

language, provided it is human...Every human language has at its disposal this self “as such,” even if the word for it is lacking (*Animal* 93).

For Peirce this faculty is absent—it is an incapacity that reveals itself in and through the call to the impersonal machinery of language, the division of a self at the very heart of itself. In the place of this faculty or power is what Derrida terms a non-power or “nonresponse, a language that doesn’t respond because it is fixed or stuck in the mechanicity of its programming, and finally lack, defect, deficit, or deprivation” (*Animal* 87). Why don’t you express yourself naturally? Peirce cannot respond, and his lack of “natural expression” represents for his imagined interlocutors an incapacity of what Derrida calls a “Here I am” that presents itself as responsible, “... ‘Here I am’ as responsibility implies this self-presentation, this *autotelic*, autodeictic, autobiographical movement, exposing oneself before the law; and second, *because* ‘Here I am’ as responsibility implies the possibility of ‘responding,’ of answering for oneself in the response to the appeal or command of the other” (*Animal* 111). Peirce finds that he cannot respond, at least not naturally, because his thought remains within the mechanicity of what he terms diagrams, and so he is keenly aware, then, of what Derrida refers to as “the question of how an iterability that is essential to every response, and to the ideality of every response, can and cannot fail to introduce nonresponse, automatic reaction, mechanical reaction into the most alive, most ‘authentic,’ and most responsible response” (*Animal* 112). In the Derridean formulation of this problem every response depends paradoxically upon nonresponse, the capacity for response entails as well a fundamental incapacity. For Peirce, the condition of language would seem to be that all language is foreign, which is to say that all language betrays the ideal of natural expression, for

language itself is a communicative realm that must exclude the natural expression of consciousness it is usually considered to represent.

For Peirce there is no “natural expression” free from language as a technical instrument, no word or communicable intent not “perfused with signs.” If natural expression evokes a purity of intent, and subjects itself to *repetition* in order to function as a sign at all (a claim common to both Peirce and Derrida), and thus its seeming purity is a condition of the impurity of a copy or citation, then Derrida’s classic analysis of the effects of a signature bears on this point: “But the condition of possibility of those effects is simultaneously, once again, the condition of their impossibility, of the impossibility of their rigorous purity. In order to function, that is, to be readable, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to be detached from the present and singular intention of its production. It is its sameness which, by corrupting its identity and its singularity, divides its seal” (*Limited* 20). All language, all communicational forms, operate by means of iterability: “the possibility of disengagement and citational graft which belongs to the structure of every mark, spoken or written, and which constitutes every mark in writing before and outside of every horizon of semio-linguistic communication” (*Limited* 12). Even, it follows quite obviously, the citation of an “I” or voice: “Nothing is in fact more irreducibly singular than ‘I,’ and yet nothing is more universal, anonymous, and substitutable” (*Without* 125). Every language is foreign, and the capacity of expression is a fundamental incapacity to express the very thing it purports to express. As David Wills puts it in *Prosthesis*, “Language inaugurates a structure of the prosthetic when the first word projects itself from the body into materiality, or vice versa; by being always already translation, constituting itself as otherness, articulation of the othernesses that constitute it, language as prosthesis” (300).

In a very important late essay titled “Typewriter Ribbon,” Derrida circles around a number of themes that helpfully summarize the very same issues that I will explore concerning Peirce. In particular, it is the thought of what Derrida referred to in *Of Grammatology* as “a double movement of protention and retention” (84) that is characteristic of the cybernetic machine, what Peirce might call the circular movements of independency and harmony. This can also be seen, in the terms used so far in this essay, as the simultaneous capacities for selfhood and language as an incapacity, that the leap into communication implies a certain foreclosure or sacrifice of the possibility of expression. This requires a certain kind of paradoxical logic that resists Hegelian synthesis, that resists moreover any *identity* whatsoever. A logic of the machine that refuses the static binary logic of reductionism:

One of our greatest difficulties, then, would be to reconcile with the machine a thinking of the event, that is, a thinking of what remains real, undeniable, inscribed, singular, of an always essentially *traumatic* type, even when it is a happy event: an event is always traumatic, its singularity interrupts an order and rips apart, like every decision worthy of the name, the normal fabric of temporality or history. How, then, is one to reconcile, *on the one hand*, a thinking of the event, which I propose withdrawing, despite the apparent paradox, from an ontology or a metaphysics of presence (it would be a matter of thinking an event that is undeniable but without pure presence), and, *on the other hand*, a certain concept of machineness? The latter would imply at least the following predicates: a certain materiality, which is not necessarily a corporeality, a certain technicity, programming, repetition or iterability, a cutting off from or independence from

any living subject—the psychological, sociological, transcendental, or even human subject, and so forth (*Without* 136).

Derrida here outlines the scope of the logic being sought, one that does not in Hegelian fashion repossess or recontain the excluded foundation that makes it possible, but sacrifices or forecloses that possibility continually. This thought of the joining of event and machine leads us to a consideration of the cybernetic machine, a field of study now gathered under the name of systems theory.

Cary Wolfe expertly links Derrida's deconstruction to the innovations of Niklas Luhmann: "Luhmann's handling of systems theory accomplishes just the sort of 'conservation' of the logic of the *grammé* that Derrida calls for, a conservation that is crucial to any posthumanism whatsoever" (*Posthumanism* 8). In particular, Wolfe identifies as one of the most salient convergences of deconstruction and systems theory a "disarticulation of consciousness and communication" (*Posthumanism* 20). In essence, the metaphysical construct of the human or subject is excluded from the act of communication. Semiosis, on this condition, can then be seen as the general mode of inquiry that Peirce outlined, and as such no longer requires a subject. But despite the abandonment of a humanist subject, Peirce's project is in many respects different from Derrida's in ways that should not be overlooked or elided, particularly Peirce's attempt to recoup or consolidate the proliferation of semiosis he so presciently described (see Uwe Wirth on this difference with Derrida), but I will argue that in this particular case Peirce pursues a logic of the event-machine of semiosis through the foreclosure ("negation") of the event of individuality for the machine of communication, what Anne Freadman refers to as "the machinery of talk." Peirce's semiotics, in this manner, describes in some respects the rudimentary characteristics of the cybernetic machine.

In Two Places at Once

Peter Skagestad's article "Peirce's Inkstand as an External Embodiment of Mind" (1999) offers a reading of Peirce that attempts to account for the material embodiment of thought. Skagestad opens with the following suggestive passage from Peirce: "A psychologist cuts out a lobe of my brain (*nihil animale a me alienum puto*) and then, when I find I cannot express myself, he says, 'You see, your faculty of language was localized in that lobe.' No doubt it was; and so, if he had filched my inkstand, I should not have been able to continue my discussion until I had got another. Yea, the very thoughts would not come to me. So my faculty of discussion is equally localized in my inkstand. It is localization in a sense in which a thing may be in two places at once" (CP 7.366). Peirce again addresses an incapacity for expression, but this time he attributes it to the lack of an effective technical means for communicating. He seems to suggest that mental processes cannot be expressed, even to *himself*, unless embodied or actualized through a material form that can work in the world. At the same time he mocks the idea that the *faculty* of language is confined or localized in the brain alone. A brain and inkstand are both assigned similar roles as determinative factors of expression. As Skagestad remarks:

One thing Peirce is doing in the passage quoted is, of course, to ridicule the idea that the faculty of discussion, or any other mental faculty, is localized in the brain or anywhere else. (The context makes it clear, by the way, that it is not just the idea that the faculty is localized in a particular lobe that is being dismissed, but rather the idea that it is localized in the brain at all.) He is not saying, nor does he mean, that the faculty of discussion is localized in the inkstand.... We might now be tempted to dismiss the reference to the inkstand as only a joke: localization in

the sense in which a thing can be in two places at once is, of course, the same thing as no localization at all. So, it might be argued, what Peirce is doing is using the very ludicrousness of the idea of the mind being localized in an inkstand as a way of highlighting the equal ludicrousness of supposing the mind to be localized in the brain, or anywhere else (553).

As Peirce says elsewhere, “the idea must be embodied (or ensouled; it is all one) in order to attain complete being” (EP2 123). The point here can be most simply stated by arguing that Peirce is proposing a distinction between states of *feeling* (inner states of consciousness) and rational thought or communication (even an “inner conversation”) as requiring embodiment (not necessarily material embodiment) in language or something like it. Even inner thoughts are subject to mechanization insofar as they can be communicated either to oneself or another. As quoted above: “thoughts are what he is ‘saying to himself,’ that is, is saying to that other self that is just coming into life in the flow of time. When one reasons, it is that critical self that one is trying to persuade, and all thought whatsoever is a sign, and is mostly of the nature of language” (EP2 228). Following a similar line of argument, Skagestad goes on to say, “Peirce never denied the existence of consciousness, and he did not deny that we may have introspective knowledge of our conscious mental states, but he simply did not regard cognition as consisting of such conscious states. Cognition consists in the manipulation of signs which may be externally embodied; as each sign is what it is by virtue of its possible later interpretations - i.e. virtually - so the mind itself is virtual” (554). At this point one is tempted to attribute to Peirce a kind of mental externalism, that thought is indeed to be found in the machines of its production and archivization. Skagestad writes, “In Peirce's view you do not find the mind inside the brain, any more than you find electricity inside copper wires - an analogy explicitly cited

by Peirce. You find the mind where there are inkstands or other means of expressing thoughts, paper or other vehicles for preserving and conveying thoughts, and of course brains capable, through the intermediary of eyes and hands or the equivalent, of interacting with external tools and media” (553). The mind is in two places at once, then, in the sense in which it the production of an interaction between a possible thought and its material embodiment. “To conclude, in Peirce's view, to be a reasoner is to be a user of machines, be they soft machinery, like alphabets, numerals, logical notations, and typefaces, or hard machinery, like logic machines, alembics, cucurbits, and inkstands” (559).

While remarkably insightful, Skagestad’s interpretation leaves some lingering questions because the means (or perhaps the mechanization) of expressing thoughts seems to be left untheorized. How do inkstands and logical notations express thoughts? Like a copper wire conducting electricity? Indeed, though Skagestad rightly claims that Peirce does not deny the existence of conscious mental states, he does, as quoted above, deny knowledge of what is “immediate,” pronouncing these senses to be “hidden” (CP 8.144). Skagestad, it seems to me, imports a representationalism into Peirce’s thought by suggesting that we are “users of machines” and so implies that our relationship to these machines is one of a transparent means of expressing thought, that we express thought *through* machines. In a similar discussion of Daniel Dennett’s theories of consciousness and language as prosthesis, Cary Wolfe writes, “The problem is that it is not clear how such prosthetic processes and devices can be said to constitute—to ‘store, process, and *re-present*’ (in Dennett’s words)—‘our’ thinking. After all, if we pay attention to the material, social, technical, and cultural complexities of such devices, then in what sense can the internal psychic states Dennett calls ‘our thinking’ be said to be ‘re-presented’ by such

devices?” (*Posthumanism* 36). This suggests that Dennett, and I wish to argue by extension Skagestad, “uses a fundamentally representationalist concept of language that reinstalls the disembodied Cartesian subject at the very heart of his supposedly embodied, materialist functionalism” (*Posthumanism* 36). When Skagestad claims that one only finds the mind in its technical or mechanical expression, one is tempted to reply that, rather, one *doesn’t* find it, the mind being neither here nor there. It’s always in the place you *don’t* look. As in a passage from Peirce quoted by Skagestad: “What I say is that the mind is virtual, not in a series of moments, not capable of existing except in a space of time - *nothing* in so far as it is at any one moment” (CP 8.248, emphasis added). *Nothing* because the mind at any one moment, any particular state of consciousness, is foreclosed, excluded, or sacrificed to the machine at the moment of communication. In Derridean terms: “The originary and pre- or meta-phonetic writing that I am attempting to conceive of here leads to nothing less than an ‘overtaking’ of speech by the machine” (*Grammatology* 79). What this will mean is that speech, voice, or mind is captive to a *fundamental incapacity* of expression: minds cannot communicate.

Bees and Crystals

“I should like to write a little book on ‘the conduct of Thoughts’ in which the introductory chapter should introduce the reader to my existential graphs, which would then be used throughout as the apparent subject, the parable or metaphor, in terms of which everything would be said,—which would be far more scientific than dragging in the ‘mind’ all the time, in German fashion, when the mind and psychology has no more to do with the substance of the book than if I were to discourse of the ingredients of the ink I use.”

—Charles S. Peirce (*Semiotics and Significs* 195, qtd. in Freadman 218).

Given these themes, it is not surprising that no less than Jürgen Habermas has accused Peirce of wanting to “conceptualize the interpretation of signs abstractly, detached from the model of linguistic communication between a speaker and a hearer, detached even from the basis of the human brain. Today this makes us think of the operations of artificial intelligence, or of the mode of functioning of the genetic code; Peirce had crystals and the work of bees in mind” (243). Habermas refers to the following passage: “Thought [i.e., the development of signs] is not necessarily connected with a brain. It appears in the work of bees, of crystals, and throughout the purely physical world” (CP 4.551). For Habermas, Peirce abandons the “philosophy of consciousness” in favor of a cosmology of the sign able to “encompass nature and not just our interpretation of nature. Only then would the topos of the ‘book of nature’ shed its metaphorical character, and every natural phenomenon would be transformed—if not into a letter, than at least into a sign that determines the series of its interpretants.... This semeiotic idealism requires, of course, a naturalization of semeiosis. The price Peirce had to pay for this is the anonymization and depersonalization of the mind in which signs call forth their interpretants” (261). Habermas charges Peirce with the failure to have a real theory of communication because he pointedly neglects to theorize the moment of one mind meeting another, one might say he avoids theorizing a “face to face” encounter: “[Peirce] neglected that moment of Secondness that we encounter in communication as contradiction and difference, as the *other* individual’s ‘mind of his own’” (264). Instead, Peirce reverses the situation by positing that the “other” is simply the development of the sign itself (the “other” in this sense is an internal product of the sign’s reference) and so the mind is absorbed into the sign: “What remains after this abstraction are currents of depersonalized sequences of signs, in which every sign refers as the interpreter to the

previous sign, and refers as the interpretandum to the following sign. To be sure, these linkages are established only through the mediation of a mind in which signs are able to call forth interpretations: ‘intelligent consciousness must enter into the series’ (CP 2.303). Still, this *mind* remains anonymous, because it consists of nothing other than that three-placed relation of representation in general, *it* is absorbed by the structure of the sign” (246).

Habermas remains intent on avoiding what he calls the anonymization of the interpreter because otherwise we are led to a conception of communication in which “universalization asserts itself, only from *one* side: communication is not for the sake of reaching initial understanding between ego and alter-ego about something in the world; rather, interpretation exists only for the sake of the representation and the ever more comprehensive representation of reality” (263). What Habermas objects to, it seems, is the seemingly independent development of this third between ego and alter-ego apart from any particular consciousness. Likewise, in reference to Peirce’s famous idea of an infinite series of interpretants, Habermas writes, “Yet, such an infinite regress would come about only if the process of interpretation were to circle from within itself, as it were, without continual stimulation from outside, and without discursive processing” (259). In both cases Habermas is exactly right, without being right that they are problems. Habermas takes the flaw of Peirce’s semiotics, implicit in his failure to theorize communication between minds, to be what can be called the *internal* development of a sign, the fact that it fails to ground an “intersubjective relationship that requires [Ego and alter-ego] to orient themselves toward each other as first person is oriented toward second person. That means, however, that each must distinguish himself from the other in the first-person plural from others as third persons” (264). Again, Habermas posits a “face to face”

encounter as the ground of communication that still requires what Derrida has referred to as “voice” or “natural writing”—the “other” must present itself in “the first person.”

Habermas’s implicit defense of a kind of humanism in communication theory makes itself explicit in his description of Peirce’s “naturalization” of communication processes: “by being absorbed into an all-encompassing nexus of communication, the conversation among humans loses just what is specific to it” (262). If there is nothing specific to the conversation among humans then the basis of an intersubjective theory of communication loses its bearing because it would then be forced to universalize intersubjectivity, and then one is left in the strange position of positing intersubjective communications in the natural world, of depersonalized objects or animals encountering each other in the “first person.” But it is hard to see how attributing specificity to human conversation then avoids what Habermas calls “the philosophy of consciousness” and “the epistemic self-relation of the representing subject” (249). As Klaus Oehler succinctly puts it, “[Habermas] makes intentionality depend on consciousness and reason, and divorces it radically from physical processes. This dualism of mind and nature is not merely foreign to Peirce’s thought. Peirce opposed it. He would charge Habermas with Cartesianism, and it is difficult to see how Habermas can survive this criticism” (270). Despite this, Habermas’s criticisms, particularly the charge that Peirce’s semiotics can only develop *within* or on *one side* are remarkably enlightening because they in fact point to the principle virtue of Peirce’s idea of communication: that the mind, the “first-person” or “Here I am,” is foreclosed or excluded from the communicative act itself. The mind and the communicative event are not in a relationship of transmission, representation, or expression, but they are in fact closed off from one another entirely, and this difference is what allows the communicative act and the mind to exist as separate in the first place.

A different, though also informative, reading of Peirce is that of Vincent Colapietro in *Peirce's Approach to the Self*. But Colapietro still manages to import the ghost of Cartesianism into Peirce's thought by supposing that a certain idea of subjectivity (however denuded) is not excluded from a truly universal, general, or formal theory of signs: "We cannot fully understand any of these fundamental dimensions of human subjectivity apart from an elaborate theory of semiotic processes. However, is the reverse true? Can we understand the nature of varieties of semiosis apart from any consideration of the subject?" (42). For Colapietro, the answer is a definite "no" because the subject is produced through semiosis as the subject of an address: "the self is alternately a speaker and a listener, a source *from whom* discourse flows and a being *to whom* discourse is addressed. The self might also be a topic of conversation, someone *about whom* something is said. Moreover, the self as speaker is never simply a speaker; in any utterance the self makes, there are echoes of the discourses of others. The self as speaker is someone *through whom* others speak....The subject is, among other things, a medium through which forces and persons other than the subject speak" (38). The subject is determined or actualized through an effect of semiosis, a mode of address, localization, and even embodiment: "The organism is the means *through which* the self is able to address and be addressed by some other" (58). The subject, in this account, seems to occupy much the same role as an inkstand as discussed above. Doesn't this then mean that the self as usually understood *isn't* able to be addressed? Colapietro advances the notion of the self as a kind of performative, that the self is *produced through* semiotic activity as the object or agent of an address, that the self is essentially this power or capacity for addressing and being addressed. To recall Derrida: "Its ink or power would here be the 'I,' not necessarily *the power to say 'I'* but the ipseity of being *able to be* or *able to do 'I,'* even before any

autoreferential utterance in a language” (*Animal* 92). Which is to say that this *able to do* is also in fact a *not able* (it is both) because the subject can only be observed or investigated as an originary cleft or breach. The subject is *already* that through which an other speaks, the other that calls the subject to language, that *I* which through its (non-)response, through its (in)ability to respond, its (in)capacity for language, always become a *He*. If Peirce defines the self as a “possible member of society” then that self only becomes actualized or determined through a community, through paradoxically effacing itself as an individual.

Along these same lines, Colapietro also points out that Peirce connects the notion of self to the power of self-control. Interestingly, Colapietro’s take on the Peircean notion of self-control leads to an apparent paradox: “If the self can only realize itself through its commitments to ideals and if the commitment to ever higher ideals necessarily requires ever greater surrenders of the self, then the true self can emerge only when the futile ego dissolves” (96). This is *power* as *non-power*, despite Colapietro’s attempts to reconcile it to a more traditional ontological notion of the subject: “The human self *is* an organically embodied center of purpose and power” (92). Peirce’s *power*, though, is thoroughly impersonal: “not the sham power of brute force....but the creative power of reasonableness, which subdues all other powers, and rules over them with its sceptre, knowledge, and its globe, love” (CP 5.520). As Colapietro points out, “The ideal of reasonableness requires a radical openness to what may confront the individual, either in the guise of another person or of an inner thought, as utterly foreign: ‘The idea of other, of *not*, becomes a very pivot of thought’ (CP 1.324)” (93). To be radically open to the utterly foreign, though, undermines the subject as the seat of power and agency, and thus power in turn represents a kind of *surrender* to power, as well as a surrender to the law in direct opposition to a Kantian notion of *giving* oneself the law.

How, then, can the subject or mind be reconceived from the point of view of Peircean semiotics? Colapietro quotes an intriguing passage from the unpublished manuscripts: “a *mind* may, with advantage, be roughly defined as a *sign-creator in connection with a reaction-machine*” (qtd. in Colapietro 89). Could it be that thinking the mind, subject, or self entails thinking together the event and the machine? Thinking them at once as an originary breach or cleft, as a unity but not an identity? Colapietro writes, “However, it is one one thing to say that a *general* and *formal* theory of signs does not necessarily take into account the subject of semiosis, and it is quite another to assert that such a theory of signs *cannot* in principle investigate the subject. It is as though the investigator of semiotic phenomena has a form of the Midas touch in which everything touched turns to—signs, the object of the mind’s desire. And, in becoming a sign, it ceases to be what it was prior to the glance of the semiotician” (44). Colapietro’s complaint is well founded as the actual truth of the situation because the *becoming sign* of the subject, the observational moment at which the subject, as Peirce might put it, stands *for* something *to* some other, abandons or sacrifices the subject to the mechanization of language or of any general semiosis. People become like bees and crystals, even to themselves.

A Blueprint of the Cybernetic Machine

To come back to our original question: how do we begin thinking the event and the machine at once? What is the blueprint of an event-machine? Colapietro notes a fascinating essay from 1966 by Larry Holmes on Peirce’s idea of self-control. Holmes divests it of any need for a philosophy of the subject: “we can take self-control to mean not the control of a self (substantively), but simply auto-control, the control from within of

whatever kind of organism the human being is found to be” (121). The principle breakthrough of Holmes’s essay is to make explicit the connection between the Peircean account of inquiry and the self-control of reasoning with an account of feedback mechanisms as described in cybernetics: “In cybernetic terminology, there is a corrective feedback, which tends, as the action is considered and repeated, to reduce the oscillations - one's violent wayward impulses - and to bring the action closer to the ideal. There is also a similar process with respect to norms or ideals, until a stable one emerges; although Peirce appears to hold that in the overall development of reason no norm is entirely stable, which indeed seems consistent with an evolutionary pragmatism applied to a developing organism. As Norbert Wiener writes, ‘The stable state of a living organism is to be dead’” (118). Indeed, Peirce often pronounces the ultimate end of semiosis, the stable reference of a sign, to be a “dead” sign. And Peirce often explicitly described his own theory of inquiry as a quest for stability within vacillating limits: “if experience in general is to fluctuate irregularly to and fro, in a manner to deprive the ratio sought of all definite value, we shall be able to find out approximately within what limits its fluctuates” (EP1 201).

On this account there is no need for a subject of semiosis since it describes the automatic functioning of a machine. There is no reflexive “self” because there is “no commitment about anything there at which the reflexive is aimed” (121). Holmes points to the following passage from the unpublished manuscripts as particularly suggestive for his thesis:

Assuming that all of each man's actions are those of a machine, as is indubitably, at least approximately, the case, he is a machine with an automatic governor, like any artificial motor; and moreover, somewhat, though not quite, as the governor

on an engine, while it automatically begins to turn off steam as soon as the machinery begins to move too fast, is itself automatically controlled for the sake of avoiding another fault, that of too sudden a change of speed, so, and more than so, man's machinery is provided with an automatic governor upon every governor to regulate it by a consideration not otherwise provided for. For while an automatic governor may be attached to any governor to prevent any given kind of excess in its action, each such attachment complicates the machine.... [But] in the human machine,—or, at least, in the cortex of the brain, or in whatever part it be whose action determines of what sort the man's conduct shall be,—there seems, as far as we can see no limit to the self-government that can and will be brought to bear upon each such determining action, except the lack of time before the conduct which was to be determined must come into actual play (MS 649, 19-21; qtd. in Holmes 122).

Somewhat, approximately, though not quite, an automatic machine. Why the qualifications? Why these quasi-machines? In one sense, Peirce is surely attempting to avoid the reductionism of modern science, the trivialization of input-output schemes in order to make them more predictable, and gesturing instead towards what cyberneticist Heinz von Foerster has called a *non-trivial* machine, which is to say a machine capable of changing its outputs. But in another more fundamental sense, Peirce is pursuing the logic of the Derridean event-machine. As Holmes goes on to say,

The "control of control" that Peirce describes here and in many other passages is what is known as second-order feedback. It is of particular interest because it can be shown that such a system is self-correcting (ordinarily without requiring further higher orders of control) in a manner essentially free from disruptive feedback (to

use Ross Ashby's term) - the wild oscillation or "hunting" that throws any system, cybernetic or moral, out of whack (5.440). Moreover, the self-correction takes place by a means that is self- structuring, and consistent with Peirce's pragmatic method of inquiry: a point with some relevance to the question of whether a substantive self is needed to explain self-control (122-123).

Holmes opens the door to a consideration of the cybernetic machine alongside semiosis, but stops well short of describing how the mechanisms of feedback and self-corrective behavior may operate in Peircean semiosis, and particularly how they operate in communication systems. How, in other words, do these not-quite automatic machines *communicate*, with themselves or others? Holmes gestures towards an answer in his discussion of Peirce's idea of the "review process" of action and inquiry: "The review is made more efficacious by breaking up the reasonings so finely, and arranging the critique so mechanically, that there is little chance for error or doubt. The system of existential graphs is designed, he says, to accomplish just this purpose" (118). These graphs are the diagrams that Peirce is forever alluding to as the real substance of his thought.

Indeed, many of the trickier or more complicated passages in Peirce's work allude to the graphs as where all is made (relatively) clear, and it is here that the logic of the event-machine takes shape. Only a few key aspects need concern us.⁵ Peirce's graphs are a diagrammatic effort to break reasoning down into the most minute parts possible. As Don D. Roberts writes in *The Existential Graphs of Charles S. Peirce*, "What are the smallest steps into which a reasoning can be dissected? Insertions and omissions. According to Peirce, if each elementary operation of a symbolic logic is either an insertion or an

⁵ For a more complete and mathematically minded discussion of Peirce and Spencer-Brown, see Louis H. Kauffman's essay "The Mathematics of Charles S. Peirce."

omission, then the operations of that logic are ‘as analytically represented as possible’ (4.374)” (111). The graphs themselves take place on a “Sheet of Assertion,” the universe of all that may be said to be true. Drawing a single circle, or “cut”, on the Sheet of Assertion makes the assertion or indication represented by that cut, the space inside of the circle, “false.” This difference or distinction belongs to the category of Secondness or the indexical, what Peirce sometimes called the “not” and what Anne Freadmen takes to be for Peirce “the very sign of difference, and hence, the formal condition for any classification” (134). To represent a “true” indication as an individual proposition (rather than as joined with the undifferentiated Sheet of Assertion) one must then draw another circle inside the first one, indicating in the fashion of a double-negative that the original false indication is itself false, thus true.

Indicating truth as the function of a kind of double-negative (“it’s not *not* true!”) may seem exasperating but it is in fact is the critical move of the graphs. The two circles cancel each other out, suggesting that what is indicated as true is continuous with the undifferentiated Sheet (insofar as it is true), but *also* differentiated from it (insofar as it is false). In other words, truth is a function of *contingency*. To indicate any individual proposition as true one must *keep drawing circles* within the first. This has the effect of redescribing truth as a process of making distinctions—that the “real” is only revealed paradoxically through the progressive enfolding of distinctions. As Louis H. Kauffman points out, “As a Sign of itself, the circle has only itself as a part. That part, equal to the whole, makes the distinction that is the referent of the Sign” (“Mathematics” 31). That is, the circle indicates itself as different from itself. Consequently, we have a determinative oscillation—just as in the cybernetic machine. This also has much in common with Derrida’s description of a “cut” in “Typewriter Ribbon”: “This *cut* assures it a sort of

archival independence or autonomy that is quasi-machinelike (not machinelike but *quasi-machinelike*), a power of repetition, repeatability, iterability, serial and prosthetic substitution of self for self” (*Without* 133). The cut represents, if you will, the *quasi* of the quasi-machine, the hyphen we encounter in “event-machine,” a sort of abyss we fall into and cannot escape except by taking shovel in hand and digging infinitely deeper, circles within circles.

One of the more immediately interesting aspects of the Existential Graphs concerns what happens when one draws just one circle, indicating “false.” This is equivalent to the famous Liar’s Paradox: “This statement is false.” What follows of course are the familiar oscillations of a self-referential paradox. This suggests that the very foundation of any indication, of any statement or predication at all, can be understood as a self-referential distinction, a distinction that indicates only one side and not the other. The initial cut which defines any particular indication must *first* distinguish itself as *false* to the Sheet of Assertion, and only then may it establish its “truth” in a series of insertions and omissions. In other terms, the cut may represent an irruption of symmetry breaking or disequilibrium. Given Peirce’s own terminology, it is just as appropriate to describe this cut as falsity or negation. Can it be that the negation or falsity of individual existence refers, in some strict abstract way, to this other falsity? If so, the “cut” or distinction would seem to be synonymous with what Peirce means by individual existence, and it points the way towards a Peircean account of the subject. The subject is chopped in half as the very condition for it to exist at all; the event of consciousness is already from the start taken up by the machine of semiosis.

The work of eccentric British mathematician George Spencer-Brown clarifies the relevance of cybernetics and systems theory for interpreting Peirce’s work. Spencer-

Brown's *Laws of Form* presents a system of diagrams for understanding how distinctions work that is in many functional respects "isomorphic" to the Existential Graphs (Kauffman "Mathematics" 2), an observation brilliantly drawn out by Floyd Merrell's *Signs Becoming Signs*. Like Peirce, Spencer-Brown begins by suggesting that any act of observation is an act of *distinction*. As Michael Schiltz puts it, *Laws of Form* "is most acutely referred to as a protologic" (11). It is an attempt to arrive at the most fundamental or elementary level at which anything may be said, indicated, or reasoned about at all.

Spencer-Brown writes, "The theme of this book is that a universe comes into being when a space is severed or taken apart...By tracing the way we represent such a severance, we can begin to reconstruct, with an accuracy and coverage that appears almost uncanny, the basic forms underlying linguistic, mathematical, physical and biological science, and can begin to see how the familiar laws of our own experience follow inexorably from the original act of severance" (xxix). Part of what *Laws of Form* is attempting to do is justify and legitimize the use of imaginary values, values that can be both positive and negative, if not at the same *time*, then at least sequentially: "For Spencer-Brown, the question is thus purely a mathematical one. His interests lie with showing the *validity* of imaginary values...the *use* of which has been common...As they can be used meaningfully for the solution of equations which cannot be solved otherwise, we must accept 'imaginary' as a 'third' category independent from (1) true (tautology: $x = x$) and (2) untrue (contradiction: $x = -x$)" (Schiltz 16). It begins with a command to act: "Draw a distinction!" Make something different from something else—or more precisely, make something different from *itself*.

As an immediate consequence of a distinction one part of the world can now indicate another. As Schiltz puts it, "The notation...thereby expresses that topological

asymmetry as well. Simultaneously with the drawing of a distinction, one of the sides is indicated” (13). Luhmann comments, “The distinction is made with the pragmatic intent to designate one side but not the other. What is distinguished, therefore, has to be distinguished from the distinction” (“Paradox” 17). Because of this the unmarked state which is produced with every distinction is absolutely unobservable, while the actual presence of the so-called marked and observable state continually slips away from any stable observation because of the revealing/obscuring action of making a distinction: “Self-referentially operating systems should thus be understood as the *operational difference* between themselves and their environment, a difference that is made through some sort of self-referential oscillating between the two sides of the distinction (i.e. system and environment)” (Schiltz 17). Spencer-Brown calls this “re-entry”—the form of the distinction (say, inside/outside) re-enters into the distinction. Thus, the distinction inside/outside will find itself on the inside of the original distinction. Luhmann writes, “The unmarked space is the indispensable other side, a reference to possibilities that, for their part, point to an infinity that cannot be contained in one place” (*Art* 117). There is an “oscillation” in the form of the distinction, as each subsequent inside/outside distinction switches the value of the form. As Kauffmann puts it, “Yet inevitably, there comes through the possibility of seeing anything at all the possibility of seeing a separate part. And so does the part become divided from the whole while still enfolded within it” (“Mathematics” 56).

To return full circle to our beginning (though it will not be quite the same now) the effects of this kind of “diagrammatic thinking” are described by Derrida in *Of Grammatology*: “Even before being determined as human (with all the distinctive characteristics that have always been attributed to man and the entire system of

significations that they imply) or nonhuman, the *grammé*—or the *grapheme*—would thus name the element. An element without simplicity” (*Grammatology* 9). Peirce’s substitution of *graphist* for mind (and a graphist need be no more complex than Maxwell’s demon: the ability to make distinctions) leads to the expulsion or over-taking of voice or mind by the machine of writing, and thus no sense of “natural expression” can be maintained because it is at its point of origin marked or marred by the unnatural or technical conditions of its emergence. More precisely, Peirce’s graphs disrupt the “‘natural’ bond between *phoné* and the sense”—leading to what Derrida refers to a “nonintuition” that departs decisively from “a psychology of intuitive consciousness” (*Grammatology* 40). He writes, “The *empty* symbolism of the written notation—in mathematical technique for example—is also for Husserlian intuitionism that which exiles us far from the *clear* evidence of the sense, that is to say from the full presence of the signified in its truth, and thus opens the possibility of crisis” (*Grammatology* 40). This crisis takes the form, we have seen, of an *incapacity*, a fundamental foreclosure of voice, mind, or consciousness—an inability to be taken up by semiosis. Derrida points to the necessity of an understanding of *machineness* that avoids the Cartesian fashion of reductionism, requiring what I have been calling the “blueprint” of a *quasi-machine*:

Instead of having recourse to the concepts that habitually serve to distinguish man from other living beings (instinct and intelligence, absence or presence of speech, of society, of economy, etc. etc.), the notion of *program* is invoked. It must of course be understood in the cybernetic sense, but cybernetics is itself intelligible only in terms of a history of the possibilities of the trace as the unity of a double movement of protention and retention. This movement goes far beyond the possibilities of the ‘intentional consciousness.’ It is an emergence that makes the

grammé appear *as such* (that is to say according to a new structure of nonpresence) and undoubtedly makes possible the emergence of the systems of writing in the narrow sense (*Grammatology* 84).

Pragmaticism and Communication

With Niklas Luhmann's systems theory a more complete account of communication emerges in which consciousness is totally foreclosed from the act of communication. In a very strict sense, "Humans cannot communicate; not even their brains can communicate; not even their conscious minds can communicate. Only communication can communicate" (*Theories* 169). This is because "we have absolutely no idea how to comprehend that conscious minds can bring about communication" (*Theories* 169). Luhmann assumes the complete self-referential closure of both consciousness and communication systems. Meaning and rationality are then generated from internal conditions of the system, and do not suppose any external reference. In this way, Luhmann's grand theory attempts a revision of our understanding of rationality. It becomes, in a Peircean sense, one-sided. As Luhmann writes in *Observations on Modernity*: "Traditional concepts of rationality lived off of *external* presumptions of meaning, whether they were based on the copying of natural laws, given objectives, or given values for the choice of objectives. Such suppositions lose their foundation, as do the secularization of a religious ideology and the loss of the representation of uniquely correct points of departure. Judgments concerning rationality must therefore be separated from external presumptions of meaning and transferred to a consistently *system-internal unity of self-reference and external reference*" (17). Peirce's rejection of a Cartesian or Archimedean point of

departure ensures that his own philosophy adopts a similar starting point. As Kauffman notes, “This means that the function of the mathematician is not to determine the eternal nature of the objects in the garden, but rather to find that they and the mathematician himself (or herself) are all Signs, growing together in the expansion of Language” (103). Peirce always starts from within semiosis, and thus signs are always partial. Anne Freadman writes, “Peirce’s sign is not the figure of impartial *judgment*; it is the figure of partial representation” (189).

Freadman’s impressive account of semiosis in *The Machinery of Talk* offers a useful bridge to Luhmann’s system’s theory because she advances an account of semiosis without a subject:

Peirce argues consistently throughout his career that the necessary formal conditions for something’s being a sign must not rest on the presuppositions of persons engaged in thinking. On the contrary, it has the function of explaining the processes of thinking: it is the “law” that underpins the “event.” My argument throughout this book has sought to show that Peirce’s research leads him to relinquish the position adopted in “On a New List of Categories” that rests on the assumption of human reason, and to seek an account of the events that effect semiosis. When Peirce describes real cases of semiosis, the thinghood and the eventhood of the sign, and hence of its interpretant, must be specified, and on occasion—particularly those occasions when he is tracing the operations of inquiry—this does indeed involve person in ‘conversation’—bodies, things in the world, the locus of experience are the *sine qua non* of action. This is the machinery of talk (219).

There is no detachment of semiosis “in itself” from what Freadman calls the *genre* of its production. Semiosis proceeds from the local, specific, and pragmatic. It cannot be separated from the *technical* conditions of its emergence: “If a technical apparatus is in principle the condition of possibility for any sign, this displaces the locus of activity from cerebration, from concepts, from the universal scope of the theory of knowledge in general, on to local contrivances, with their constraints, their limited and specific capacities, and their local applicability” (264). Ultimately, this leads Freadman to reject the necessity of a subject for semiosis because the production of a subject is entailed only for particular semiotic practices (219). What this means in conclusion for Freadman is that “thought is nothing without its instruments” and this remains the condition for understanding Peirce’s semiotics (273). It may be added that from the point of view of semiosis, thought understood as individual consciousness is indeed *nothing*. It is the outside or sacrificial condition—the body that absorbs the “cut”—for the possibility of semiosis in the first place.

Likewise, Luhmann’s understanding of communication excludes consciousness. This distinction between consciousness and communication posits as necessary what Peirce laments in the epigraph to this essay: “Systems of the mind and systems of communication exist completely independently of each other. At the same time, however, they form a relationship of structural complementarity. They can actualize and specify only their own structures and thus can change only themselves. They use each other for a reciprocal initiation of these structural changes” (*Theories* 177). If both minds and communications are seen as captive to one-sidedness, to their own enfolding distinctions, then as Luhmann points out they can be seen inhabiting the “other side” or unmarked space of each others internal operations. Such complementarity reveals itself in the fact

that as conscious beings our relationship to consciousness supersedes our relationship to language: “This superiority of consciousness to communication (which, of course, corresponds in inverted system-reference to a superiority of communication over consciousness) becomes fully clear if one realizes that consciousness is occupied not only with worlds or with vague word-and-sentence ideas, but additionally and often more importantly with perception and with the imaginative construction and dismantling of images” (*Theories* 166). Immediate perception is not reducible to language. When it comes to minds and communication systems “We are dealing in both cases with structurally determined systems, that is to say, systems that orient each reproduction of their own operations, whatever the external causes may be, on their own structures” (*Theories* 171). How do they relate to one another then? “The mind cannot instruct communication, because communication constructs itself. But the mind is a constant source of impulses for the one or the other turn of the operative process inherent in communication. Only the mind is capable of perception (including the perception of communication)” (*Theories* 177). This relationship is asymmetrical. Consciousness does not require communication but communication cannot exist without consciousness: “How is communication possible if it has such a fluid, constantly changing foundation? How can communication reproduce itself if it must rely on a multitude of nervously vibrating brains and agitated minds?” (*Theories* 171). Communication systems do this by being closed to the “blooming, buzzing” confusion of consciousness and perception, which can only be felt as irritations or impulses from the outside that the communication system can only cope with on its own internal basis.

Similarly, Peirce insists on a distinction between thought as the general property of a community (even a community of selves) and what he terms feeling or quality as the

immediate perception of consciousness. In fact, even early on Peirce suggests that feeling cannot be properly *thought* about at all: “The First must therefore be present and immediate, so as not to be second to a representation. It must be initiative, original, spontaneous, and free; otherwise it is second to a determining cause. It is also something vivid and conscious; so only it avoids being the object of some sensation. It precedes all synthesis and all differentiation: it has no unity and no parts. It cannot be articulately thought: assert it, and it has already lost its characteristic innocence; for assertion always implies a denial of something else. Stop to think of it, and it has flown!” (EP1 248).

Feeling as perceptive consciousness is totally unrelated and unrelatable to the terms of semiosis and *cannot* engage in the actual meaning of a proposition. What is the meaning, then? What follows is Peirce’s mature formulation of his pragmatism:

My pragmatism, having nothing to do with qualities of feeling, permits me to hold that the predication of such a quality is just what it seems, and has nothing to do with anything else. Hence, could two qualities of feeling everywhere be interchanged, nothing but feeling could be affected. Those qualities have no intrinsic significations beyond themselves. Intellectual concepts, however,—the only sign-burdens that are properly denominated “concepts,”—essentially carry some implication concerning the general behavior either of some conscious being or of some inanimate object, and so convey more, not merely than any feeling, but more, too, than any existential fact, namely, the “*would-acts*” of habitual behavior; and no agglomeration of actual happenings can ever completely fill up the meaning of a “would be.” (EP2 402).

What is happening here? Meaning is the distinction between pure feeling and the actualization of an “existential fact.” Meaning as potentiality (a “would be”) is the

difference between possibility and actuality, and thus requires further distinctions, further actualizations, none of which are final and “fill up” the meaning—possibility is never exhausted. Luhmann’s own account of meaning is remarkably similar: “Instead of presenting a world, the medium of meaning refers to a selective processing....Actualized meaning always comes about selectively and refers to further selections. It is therefore fair to say that meaning is constituted by the distinction between actuality and potentiality (or between the real as momentarily given and as possibility)” (*Art* 107). In the terms of this essay, consciousness or feeling is an overload of information and must be *cut*, must be *distinguished from* communication. Consciousness cannot be communicated: “A social system cannot think; a psychological system cannot communicate” (*Theories* 165).

It is important to recognize that Peirce, in contrast to Luhmann and Derrida, often concerns himself with a consolidation or recuperation of continuity in the form of an asymptotic approach toward reality. The reason for this is in fact quite simple. Peirce starts from the position of a blank sheet, a continuum containing no actual information until a distinction is made. Luhmann and Spencer-Brown start with the distinction, which produces both a marked and unmarked space simultaneously. In effect, this allows for the use of an unmarked space in a system of indications, which means that thought may paradoxically glimpse a necessary indefinite “other” that cannot be expressed in thought. As Kauffman writes, “Spencer-Brown’s work can be seen as part of a continuous progression that began with Peirce’s Existential Graphs. In essence what Spencer-Brown adds to the existential graphs is the use of the unmarked state. That is, he allows the use of empty space in place of a complex of Signs. This makes a profound difference and reveals a beautiful and simple calculus of indications underlying the existential graphs. Indeed Spencer-Brown’s true contribution is that he added Nothing to the Peirce theory!”

(2). In contrast, Peirce insisted that everything, in principle, can be expressed in thought eventually (“eventually” being nearly synonymous with infinity). One is tempted to follow this difference into the rabbit-hole (perhaps never to emerge) but short of that one may observe what is at stake in such a distinction. As Kauffman notes, Spencer-Brown’s innovation can be interpreted as a radicalization of a latent element of Peirce’s thought, insisting that in every single case we must accept that our beginnings are arbitrary, even this one. Things could always be otherwise, and this is the condition for them to be anything at all.

Continuities

In *Peirce’s Approach to the Self*, Vincent Colapietro observes an interesting exchange between Peirce and William James. In *The Principles of Psychology*, James proposes an idea that could not be more perfectly designed to annoy Peirce: “No thought event comes into direct sight of a thought in another personal consciousness than its own. Absolute insulation, irreducible pluralism, is the law....Each of these minds keeps its own thoughts to itself. There is no giving or bartering between them” (qtd. in Colapietro 62). Certainly it would seem that Peirce should be able sympathize with such insulation, but in response he wrote the following: “Is not the direct contrary nearer observed facts? Is this not pure metaphysical speculation? You think there *must* be such isolation, because you confound thoughts with feeling-qualities; but all observation is against you. There are some small particulars that a man can keep to himself. He exaggerates them and his personality sadly” (CP 8.81). Peirce’s point again depends on the distinction between *feeling-qualities* and *thoughts*. That is, one cannot even communicate within a particular consciousness

without making this distinction. One is always talking to that *other* self just coming into being. Peirce admits what James cannot allow—that there is no insulation because there is no indivisible self which can be insulated. As Pierce puts it, “no present actual thought (which is a mere feeling) has any meaning, any intellectual value; for this lies not in what is actually thought, but in what this thought may be connected with in representation by subsequent thoughts; so that the meaning of a thought is altogether something virtual” (CP 5.289). Our thoughts, even our deepest and most private, are marked from the beginning with the technical and impersonal conditions of their emergence. Peirce objects to James because he does not accept the principle that minds cannot barter with each other, and his objection is founded on the principle that minds must barter even with themselves.

Luhmann writes, “Communication is only possible as an event that transcends the closure of consciousness: as the synthesis of more than the content of just one consciousness” (99). Communication systems can do this because while they do not represent consciousness directly, they do adapt to it on their own internal basis. As Cary Wolfe puts it, “In the form of meaning, then, we find that systems increase their contacts with their environments paradoxically by *virtualizing* them” (*Posthumanism* 18). For Peirce, this virtual reality constitutes the necessity of Thirdness, the re-entry of a cut made in the formless body of continuity—a continuity, moreover, that is only perceptible as *imperceptible*, observable as unobservable, only dimly felt before it has flown. In an uncharacteristically lyrical moment, Luhmann muses, “If we were to make an effort to really observe our own consciousness in its operations from thought to thought, we would certainly discover a peculiar fascination with language, but also the noncommunicative, purely internal use of linguistic symbols and a peculiar, background depth of the actuality

of consciousness, a depth on which words swim like ships chained in a row but without being consciousness itself, somehow illuminated, but not light itself" (*Theories* 166). Peirce construes that unseen light, that which illuminates without being illuminated, as the white light of the continuity of being. We cannot look but we fail to see it.

Chapter Six

The Excluded Act of Creation: Religious Feeling in Peirce & Edwards

PAGAN: Who is the God you worship?

CHRISTIAN: I do not know.

—Nicholas of Cusa, *Dialogue on the Hidden God* (209)

On April 24, 1892, Peirce had what his biographer Joseph Brent calls a “sudden and overwhelming mystical experience” (209). He felt called by a force outside himself into church to receive communion: “I found myself carried up to the altar rail, almost without my own volition.” He concludes, “I have never before been mystical; but now I am” (Brent 210). The experience would transform Peirce and perhaps accounts in part for the change in his philosophy beginning with a series of papers for *The Monist* from 1891 to 1893. As Brent puts it, “The *Monist* essays forcefully and unexpectedly proclaimed an objective idealist, as well as realist, metaphysics that seemed written by a different man” (206). Peirce would comment long after the event that the mystical experience forced him to recognize the importance of private intuition as opposed to rational intellect: “No amount of speculation can take the place of experience” (Brent 210). Yet this seemingly Emersonian notion also follows the later Emerson (of “Fate” and “Experience”) in refusing to give such experiences a foundational role in knowledge, but instead submitting these profoundly personal feelings to impersonal scrutiny. An eventual outcome of Peirce’s religious experience, the famously difficult essay “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God” (1908) presents a theory of what he terms Musement as a carefully cultivated sense of personal feeling that leads, inevitably in Peirce’s estimation, to an “argument” for the reality of God. Given Peirce’s penchant for disallowing qualities

of feeling any role in intellectual constructions, of which a rational argument for the reality of God would seem a paramount example, it is hard to know what to make of an essay which insists, on one hand, on a personal sense of universal communion, while on the other insisting just as strongly on a rigorous commitment to impersonal scientific scrutiny. The hinge or joint that connects these irreconcilable aims is obscure but can be glimpsed in the phenomenon of hypothetical reasoning—alternately called retroduction or abduction. Peirce often characterizes this kind of reasoning along the lines of Galileo’s *il lume naturale*, but such insights do not provide scientific certainty in themselves:

“Retroduction does not afford security. The hypothesis must be tested” (EP2 441). Some clues for making sense of all this can be found in the more rationally argumentative sections of the essay, in which Peirce seems concerned with no less than the circular and contingent nature of reason itself.

“A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God” is, in some sense, about something that cannot be expressed within the systems of science or rational argumentation; it is about that which must be excluded in order for rational argumentation to proceed at all. This excluded element is not extraneous or gratuitous, however—because the act of exclusion *itself* is the necessity without which science cannot function. With the mystifying revelations of quantum mechanics still on the horizon, science in the early twentieth century began to butt its head against the constraints that constituted it, particularly as the discovery of entropy called into question the explanatory power of the modern paradigm, something Peirce took note of as early as essays such as “Design and Chance,” which argues for the actual non-reducible existence of chance as a factor in the evolution of natural laws. As Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers write, “The ambition of Newtonian science was to present a vision of nature that would be universal,

deterministic, and objective inasmuch as it contains no reference to the observer, complete inasmuch as it attains a level of description that escapes the clutches of time” (213). Dissipative or entropic systems, on the contrary, thrusts the observer back into time, into a universe in which change is fundamental: “irreversible processes may be considered as the last remnants of the spontaneous and intrinsic *activity* displayed by nature when experimental devices are employed to harness it” (120). This means scientific observation enacts a necessary sort of reduction, a reversible snapshot of an irreversible process. Furthermore, given the similarities between Peirce’s mathematical foundations and the calculus of distinctions proposed by George Spencer-Brown, we are led to consider Peirce’s “Neglected Argument” within the light of second-order cybernetics as demonstrating self-reference and the principles of self-organizing systems.

If there are constraints, if there are boundaries or borders, then the all-encompassing descriptive claims of science are faced with their own limitations. Werner Heisenberg demonstrates this dawning realization when he comments that there is “something standing in the middle between the idea of an event and the actual event, a strange kind of physical reality just in the middle between possibility and reality” (15). There is a hinge or switch-point which constitutes an observation as an actualizing determination. Peirce, for his part, investigates this boundary by diving right over it into what nearly twenty years later Sigmund Freud would call the “oceanic feeling” that often accompanies a belief in God. Peirce calls this feeling Musement: “There is a certain agreeable occupation of mind which, from its having no distinctive name, I infer is not as commonly practiced as it deserves to be....Because it involves no purpose save that of casting aside all serious purpose....In fact, it is Pure Play. Now, Play, we all know, is a lively exercise of one’s powers. Pure Play has no rules, except this very law of liberty. It

bloweth where it listeth” (EP2 436). As Floyd Merrell describes it, “Musement is a state of indifference, with no particular purpose or end. It is a moment of purposeful purposelessness, mindless awareness, passive indeterminacy, all-embracing nothingness. It is in the words of Blaise Pascal, suspension between zero and infinity. For Peirce it is the lively exercise of detached contemplation, when there is neither affirmation nor denial, and at the same time there is both affirmation and denial. There is everything and there is nothing; there is neither choice nor nonchoice, only floating dreaminess” (“Musement” 90). Most importantly, this is a state of feeling that is unable, or without the capacity, to enter into a system of relations: “If one’s observations and reflections are allowed to specialize themselves too much, the Play will be converted into scientific study; and that cannot be pursued in odd half-hours” (EP2 436). A state of indifference indeed, it is a state that suspends, or places in suspense, the difference of what Peirce called Secondness, the existence of an other that inevitably brings into being the mechanisms of semiosis. Musement would seem to be a state prior to any particular determination, any particular line of thought or scientific investigation, without attaining the status of the *a priori* of metaphysical foundations. Instead, it represents the pre-semiotic ground of feeling that is excluded or negated by semiotics.

However, it takes a particular kind of Musement to lead to thoughts about God. Peirce reminds us of his three categories, “Of the three Universe of Experience familiar to us all, the first comprises all mere Ideas, those airy nothings to which the mind of poet, pure mathematician, or another *might* give local habitation and a name within that mind....The second Universe is that of the Brute Actuality of things and facts. I am confident that their Being consists in reactions against Brute forces....The third Universe comprises everything whose Being consists in active power to establish connections

between different objects in different Universes. Such is everything which is essentially a Sign....Such, too, is a living consciousness, and such the life, the power of growth of a plant. Such is a living institution,—a daily newspaper, a great fortune, a social ‘movement’” (EP2 435). Observation of the phenomenon of growth, or Thirdness, the very nature of a sign as a kind of living process, is what eventually leads to the hypothesis of God: “In growth, too, find that the three Universes conspire; and a universal feature of it is provision for later stages in earlier ones. This is a specimen of certain lines of reflection which will inevitably suggest the hypothesis of God’s Reality. It is not that such phenomena might not be capable of being accounted for, in one sense, by the action of chance with the smallest conceivable dose of a higher element; for if by God be meant the *Ens necessarium*, that very hypothesis requires that such should be the case. But the point is that that sort of explanation leaves a mental explanation just as needful as before.” (EP2 439). Scientific explanations require in turn explanations for themselves. There must be a reason for reason. But all attempts at such must end in tautology, indicating something beyond itself, something of non-reason. Peirce suggests there is an irreducible element in the universe (chance or chaos) as the active power of growth. Explanations cannot explain themselves because they must of necessity remove pure chance or chaos from the field of observation. Musement hovers somehow in between, a liminal state that resists ultimate determination in the suspension of what can be called an imaginary space, neither here nor there.

A similar notion from Pierre Duhem can help clarify how this relates to science: “Logic provides an almost absolute freedom to the physicist who wants to choose a hypothesis; but the absence of any guide or rule shouldn’t disturb him for, in fact, the physicist doesn’t choose the hypothesis on which he builds a theory; he doesn’t choose it

anymore than the flower chooses the grain of pollen that will fertilize it...the physicist limits himself to opening his thought, through attention and meditation, to the idea that must take root in him, without him” (quoted in Stengers *Cosmopolitics* 390). For Isabelle Stengers, this passage suggests that Duhem “appeals to a different physics, a physics that would promote the values of creation—coherence, beauty, simplicity—before those of realism” (*Cosmopolitics* 225), but it can also be read as a statement about the necessarily arbitrary nature of beginnings. A scientist is bound by the familiar rules of scientific discourse (we could call those rules “realism”), but how is that discourse initiated? If the values of realism and creation are not reconcilable, then how are they related as Peirce and Duhem seem to insist? How do these feelings of creation ground scientific discourse if they are not expressible within it? The answer to this question, for Peirce at least, cannot take refuge in a transcendental principle, nor in the subjective certainty of immanent encounters. The answer that the “Neglected Argument” gestures toward instead is a kind of quasi-transcendentalism. Just as it is possible to insist with Wittgenstein that death is a not a part of life, it may be that creation, whether it be divine or the igniting spark of hypothesis, cannot be a part of reality. There is only an ironic or playful repetition of the transcendental move from *within*, a ghostly figure on the margin of perception that fades from view when directly observed. The paradox can only be unfolded over time, sequentially. We are then thrust into time, into the irreversible change of dissipative systems—and the world is forever created anew through an excluded act of creation.

Feelings such as Musement point indirectly to the limits of rationalism, that which reason cannot glimpse except out of the corner of its eye, what it may only represent to itself in grief as an absence. It would seem, in the words of Derrida, that Peirce dives not into the fullness and infinite expanse of an ocean, but the bottomless terror of an abyss:

Are we obeying the principle of reason when we ask what grounds this principle which is itself a principle of grounding? We are not—which does not mean that we are disobeying it, either. Are we dealing here with a circle or with an abyss? The circle would consist in seeking to account for reason by reason, to render reason to the principle of reason, in appealing to the principle in order to make it speak of itself at the very point where, according to Heidegger, the principle of reason says nothing about reason itself. The abyss, the hole, the *Abgrund*, the empty "gorge" would be the impossibility for a principle of grounding to ground itself ("Principle" 9).

As Derrida well knows this perspective is the outcome of a modernity that calls the excluded ground of reason an abyss, a gorge or absence that constitutes our relationship to what is unthought or unknown as one either of terror or grief. Our state is one of lack and loss, and our relationship to the world is marked by a fundamental skepticism, a devaluation or "rolling from the center toward X." This tradition can be traced in the most obvious case to Descartes, who postulated that from the point of view of rationalism, the possible is merely "nothing" in contrast to the real existence of the actual. But it also results from a retreat of religion from the visible world initiated in some respects by the dualisms of John Calvin. As Mitchell Breitwieser puts it, for the Puritan "there is God and there is rotting meat and there is nothing in between" (70). A necessary prerequisite for the project of modernity is that God withdraw from the world as an active presence, that nature's "intrinsic activity" be tamed by the controlling gaze of man as objective observer.

Peirce's religious thought may be seen as pursuing in some particular sense the reverse of the modern project by inheriting a strategy of thinking that begins on American shores with Jonathan Edwards, continues with Ralph Waldo Emerson, and even reaches

back to the medieval theology of Nicholas of Cusa. If, as we have already seen, the individual self constituted through feeling can only be construed semiotically as “nothing” because it is capable of no signification in itself, then what Descartes presents as the foundational moment of self-presence, the *most* actual, is negated. Peirce’s idea is more passive: we do not think, we are *thought*: “A man is capable of having assigned to him a *role* in the drama of creation, and so far as he loses himself in that *role*,—no matter how humble it may be,—so far he identifies himself with its Author” (CP 7.572). The fundamental act of an individual scientific observation is marked from its origin with a lack or abyss as the condition of its possibility. What this means, in other words, is that actuality is only possible as in some part the negation of pure possibility—that the actualization or embodiment of thought requires a sacrifice. Descartes’ elevation of the actual over the possible is in fact fully overturned, despite the fact that this creates a strange predicament (the possible is the real, while the actual is constituted by a negation) that Peirce unfolds through a concept of potentiality, a “Third” as the unity of actual/possible. All of this is merely a particular way of restating Peirce’s pragmatism and semiotics, but this way of describing it has special resonance for the “Neglected Argument” because Peirce’s specific intervention in that essay cannot be fully understood unless it is placed in contrast to the modernity it attempts to overturn. Specifically, Peirce’s late philosophy remains fascinated, as Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson before him, by the necessary exclusions that make it possible. It does not seek a grounding outside of itself (this beginning already *within* being in some sense the principle move of Peircean semiotics) but embraces the paradox of self-reference, what Derrida above calls the “circle,” as the motivating force in what Peirce sees as the most fundamental characteristics of the universe: growth and evolution.

By briefly considering Jonathan Edwards's theological revisions of Calvin, revisions often interpreted (following Perry Miller's seminal example) as a quest for immanent "face to face" encounters with a divine unity that resembles in many respects Emerson's infamous "transparent eyeball," Peirce's own religious musings can likewise be seen in reaction to a Puritan heritage that insists on an irreconcilable division between God and a fallen material world. But like Edwards and Emerson, Peirce does not rest in dualisms, but instead interprets them *asymmetrically* following in many respects the notion of a self-referential *distinction* as formulated by mathematician George Spencer-Brown and later incorporated into the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann. In this respect, Luhmann offers a useful way to think about the juxtaposition of religion and science in the "Neglected Argument" as the result of what he calls functional differentiation. As he puts it, "Modern society's form of differentiation makes possible, or even enforces, the autonomy of separate functional areas; this is accomplished by the differentiation of certain operationally closed, autopoietic systems. Functional differentiation thus imposes on systems an obligation to reflect on their own singularity and irreplaceability, but an obligation which must also take into account that there are other functional systems of this kind in society. Knowledge - and indeed particularly demanding, advanced knowledge - is consequently only one form of social potency among others" (*Theories* 63). As distinct social systems, religion and science operate upon fundamentally different terms, different codes, but both can perform what Luhmann calls a second-order observation (an observation *of* observation) of the other's first-order observation. In Spencer-Brown's terms, this makes the paradoxical *unity* of a distinction available for observation, but only at the cost of distinguishing that unity from something else.

Musement is just such an example of second-order observation—it observes the constitutive observational act of science, and sees the unity of the distinction that science cannot see. When religion turns its gaze to science, it sees lurking underneath, unseen and unaccounted for, what Nicholas of Cusa calls the “absolute maximum” which is “free from all relation and contraction” (89) and thus free from the system of differences that makes science possible. In other words, science hides from itself its own paradoxical constitution, in the manner of the circle of reason identified by Derrida. It occludes the difference that makes it possible. Along these same lines, Peirce’s thought can also be connected backwards to Emerson in its pursuit of the limitations of rational thought, the pursuit of imaginary spaces, what Emerson describes as the sense in which “Things are, and are not, at the same time...” (585). Peirce embraces paradox with equal enthusiasm when he considers the present as “this living Death in which we are born anew” which constitutes “That Nascent State between the Determinate and the Indeterminate” (EP2 358). These are attempts to include in the positive statement its own negative mirror image as a means to broach limitations, to attempt to observe the paradoxical unity of a distinction in order to gesture indirectly towards an infinite and unlimited realm of possibility or futurity in which we may encounter the new. Such formulations are unified under the notion of an originary distinction that makes any discourse possible by delimiting that discourse against a background of everything else. Such distinctions are characterized by asymmetry: they may indicate one side but not the other. This exclusion persists in the form of a difference that makes all other differences possible, but it cannot itself be incorporated into the system.

Observing Modern Science

In *The Postmodern Turn*, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner write, “Modern science, in its classical self-conception, sharply separates ‘fact’ from ‘value,’ thereby pursuing a ‘value-free’ study of natural systems apart from ethics and metaphysics, just as capitalism bifurcates the public and private sectors, disburdening private enterprise of any public or moral obligations” (200). The anti-capitalist sentiments in the mid-career essay “Evolutionary Love” demonstrate that Peirce was in part concerned with overturning the state of affairs described in the second part of that statement, and Peirce’s concept of the scientific method addresses the first part in a systematic way. As already seen in chapter one, Peirce’s attempts to incorporate notions of chance, chaos, or possibility into scientific observation mark him as far ahead of his time, as Prigogine and Stengers note in their classic text on dissipative systems, *Order Out of Chaos*. The title works just as well as an overarching concept for Peirce’s philosophy, particularly his critique of scientific reductionism.

Niklas Luhmann offers a useful description of such critiques: “What is at stake in such a critique is the form of modern science - that is, the difference made by the fact that science exists. We are leaving aside the often heard complaint that science serves capitalism (and should rather serve socialism) because it is insufficiently articulated from the perspective of social theory. There is, however, another description of science, equally critical of modernity, that targets its center. It takes aim at a one-sided tendency toward formalization, idealization, technicalization, accounting, etc.” (*Theories* 68). Luhmann’s use of the phrase “one-sided” is particularly fortuitous since Peirce’s definition of scientific truth, intended as part of just such a critique, also includes it. For Peirce, truth is only true

insofar as it confesses its “inaccuracy and one-sidedness” as an “essential ingredient” of what makes it true (EP2 395). As Luhmann writes, “The factual contents of knowledge resist a historical as well as (for the same reason) a socio-structural classification. And bivalent logic, together with the epistemology based on it, does not provide any alternatives to this situation. If knowledge is true, it is always true” (*Theories* 62). Which is to say: the logic of modern science cannot cope with dissipative systems. Peirce’s semiotics is largely an attempt to build a logical foundation for a post-modernity that can get past these kinds of problems. It is a logic from within process or time, or a logic of change.

It is important to recognize, however, that Peirce wasn’t interested in a reactionary return to pre-scientific models of inquiry. “The Fixation of Belief” decisively argues for science, amongst all the alternatives surveyed in that essay, as the best way forward for obtaining knowledge about the universe, particularly for the fact that it is self-correcting (i.e., process oriented). Yet Peirce’s understanding of scientific method differs sharply from the modern template because he wanted to move past the forced choices that modernity imposes by offering what can be called a posthumanist redescription of the role of science in human inquiry: the detached objective observer is dispersed by a proliferating series of signs, of which the “human” observer occupies at best a set of shifting positions. And while Best and Kellner identify a host of modern thinkers interested in overturning the idea of science beholden to a “rigid subject-object bifurcation whereby the unbiased scientific mind confronts the cosmos in a detached mode of observation” (202), Peirce’s own approach to these matters is often remarkably rigorous in its insistence on moving past static dualisms without seeking higher ground in a transcendental principle.

Peirce's religious thinking offers a particularly compelling case. Joseph Brent writes, "I believe that, for Peirce, semeiotic should be understood, after his mystical experience, as the working out of how the real is both immanent and transcendent and of how the infinite speaker may be said to practice semeiosis, the action of signs, in creating our universe" (212). Brent perceptively emphasizes a kind of logic that allows something to be *both* itself and its opposite, recalling the self-limiting forms deployed by Edwards and Emerson. Such formulations cannot be reconciled in the fashion of Hegelian synthesis, but require what Evan Thompson has called "the need for back-and-forth circulation between scientific research on the mind and disciplined phenomenologies of lived experience" (*Emergence* 78). This needs to be distinguished, however, from what Thompson later writes in the same essay: "Experience is irreducible not because it possesses metaphysically peculiar 'properties' that can't be squeezed into some reified physicalist model of the universe, after the fashion of contemporary property dualism. It's irreducible because of its ineliminable transcendental character: lived experience is always already presupposed by any statement, model, or theory, and the lived body is *a priori* invariant of lived experience" (*Emergence* 90). Thompson retreats to the high ground and makes the transcendental move, the humanist move that rises over and above the world as mechanism, over and above what Peirce calls semiosis, by positing a "lived body" as some mode of existence beyond difference, thus "irreducible." It betrays, in other words, the conditions of its own emergence. Lived experience is *already* semiotic, already marked through with the distinction immanent/transcendent as its very condition for being. There is no resolution of the constitutive distinction that Thompson wants to move past to the discovery of an *a priori* as a fixed starting point, however nuanced and sophisticated and denuded an *a priori* it turns out to be. Instead, Peirce's program for

scientific investigation resembles more closely that presented by Isabelle Stengers in *Cosmopolitics*, especially the sense in which Stengers is concerned to bring about an “experience of here *and* there, the experience of a here that, by its very topology, affirms the existence of a there, and affirms it in a way that excludes any nostalgia for the possibility of erasing differences, of creating an all-purpose experience” (62). But a here *and* there that does not erase difference automatically becomes *neither* here *nor* there (a *double* negative), in the sense in which “here” may always come up against the aporetic boundary it cannot cross as a gesture of self-limitation, an internal reference to the other.

This mode of thinking has special resonance for religious thought, a system that, as Luhmann points out, is principally fixated on its own impossibility, an *inability* or *incapacity* to determine its primary object of study. But religion also performs a unique role for society as a whole: “A God who experiences everything and is accessible through communication but who does not belong to society is a singular exception that exactly copies the recursive totality of the societal system itself, a duplication that makes it possible to experience the world in a religious way” (*Social* 409). Religious feeling, in other words, can accomplish a second-order observation of society as a whole, indicating the unity of society’s constitutive distinction through a repetition of it, what Spencer-Brown calls a “re-entry” of the distinction on only one side. This is a second-order observation. It is no wonder, then, that critiques of science may center, as Freud noted, in a personal (i.e., non-social) experience of an “oceanic feeling.” But a figure more directly pertinent for Peirce and the “Neglected Argument” is the Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards. In his very intriguing book *Strands of System*, Douglas Anderson (unfortunately merely as an aside) links Peirce’s emphasis on the role of feeling in an argument for God to *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (169). It is worth making a quick detour through that text in

order to follow up Anderson's astuteness by comparing Edwards with Peirce as constituting posthumanist and second-order descriptions of religious feeling.

Jonathan Edwards and *Religious Affections*

“But although there was nothing that was seen, nothing that the world saw, or that the Christians themselves ever saw with their bodily eyes, that thus influenced and supported ‘em; yet they had a supernatural principle of love to something *unseen*; they loved Jesus Christ, for they saw him spiritually, whom the world saw not, and whom they themselves had never seen with bodily eyes”

—Jonathan Edwards (*Reader* 140)

Edwards wrote *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* in 1746, nearly twenty years before *The Nature of True Virtue*, and in some ways his development of an asymmetrical dualism, his emphasis on *process*, is less acute than in that final major statement. *Religious Affections* seeks to challenge the orthodox dismissal of the recent religious enthusiasms that had swept across New England in a most curious way. Edwards takes his theme from Timothy: “Hence true religion is called the power of godliness, in distinction from the external appearances of it, that are the form of it, ‘Having a form of godliness, but denying the power of it’ (II Tim. 3:5)” (*Reader* 144). True to Calvinist doctrine, Edwards insists on a sharp distinction between the natural and the spiritual, only to use that fundamental difference to produce a tension that defends religious feeling as true only insofar as it produces Christian practice. As Edwards puts it in a phrase quite unexpected in a text with the explicit aim of defending the potential truth of states of feeling, “Christian practice is a costly laborious thing” (*Reader* 168). The demonstration of the truth of religious affection, what designates it as spiritual and not natural, is to be found in

work. Not works, not the finished and burnished proofs of saintliness, but work itself, saintliness as a practice. It would seem that the very subject of the essay is excluded from the process it is intended to ground.

Edwards notes that there are “laws of the union of soul and body” that mean that “there never is any case whatsoever, any lively and vigorous exercise of the will or inclination of the soul, without some effect upon the body” while “on the other hand, from the same laws of the union of soul and body, the constitution of the body, and the motion of its fluids, may promote the exercise of the affections” (*Reader* 142). But what is the nature of this union? Edwards predictably insists on a dualism. Body and “animal spirits” are never “anything properly belonging to the nature of the affections; though they always accompany them, in the present state; but are only affects or concomitants of the affections, that are entirely distinct from the affections themselves, and no way essential to them” (*Reader* 143). It is precisely at this point that I’d like to press on Edwards’s dualistic scheme. What is properly considered affections is entirely distinct from the body. And yet they are in this world inseparable. His religious convictions insist on the distinction, but it is also possible to observe here an interesting tension between the spiritual and disembodied inclinations of the soul and how those inclinations are manifested in a material or bodily sense, how affections are transformed by the material and prosthetic means of their expression. Teasing out this tension is the aim of the treatise as a whole. Later, Edwards writes, “He who has no religious affection, is in a state of spiritual death, and is wholly destitute of the powerful, quickening, saving influences of the Spirit of God upon his heart. As there is no true religion, where there is nothing else but affection; so there is no true religion where there is no religious affection” (*Reader* 148). True religion is defined here by its source in religious affection, “He that has doctrinal

knowledge and speculation only, without affection, never is engaged in the business of religion” (*Reader* 145), but affection cannot constitute true religion alone. As Peirce might say, the feeling must be tested.

Edwards clarifies himself at great length, but cannot really escape the circularity of his argument. What’s particularly striking is his rather Peircean penchant for qualification. Witness just two examples, emphasis added: “True religion, *in great part*, consists in holy affections” (*Reader* 141); and true religion, again, “consists *in a great measure*, in vigorous and lively actings of the inclination and will of the soul, or the fervent exercises of the heart” (*Reader* 143). True religion is, and is not, at the same time, a product of effusive religious feeling. It is marked, in other words, with a distinction. I’d like to suggest that for Edwards that it *is* a distinction, one between natural and spiritual affections. Natural affections, as Edwards argues, set the world we observe in motion: “These affections we see to be the springs that set men agoing, in all the affairs of life, and engage them in all their pursuits: these are the things that put men forward, and carry ‘em along, in all their worldly business” (*Reader* 145). Indeed, the familiar world of worldly business would cease if affections were not engaged: “take away all love and hatred, all hope and fear, all anger, zeal and affectionate desire, and the world would be, in great measure, motionless and dead” (*Reader* 145). But the other side, the side left unmarked and designated as “spiritual affection,” cannot be so easily put to work in the world: “The Spirit of God, in all his operations upon the minds of natural men, only moves, impresses, assists, improves, or some way acts upon natural principles; but gives no new spiritual principle” (*Reader* 162).

Spiritual sense does not offer any *determinate* mode of conduct, it does not go to work in the world as itself. Instead, it refers only to *itself*. It leads to its own reproduction, a

repetition of its *difference* from the material world of determinate modes of conduct.

Feelings lead to actions, but religious feeling also leads back to itself as forever different from any particular action. As Edwards writes in a very difficult passage,

This new spiritual sense, and the new dispositions that attend to it, are no new faculties, but are new principles of nature. I use the word ‘principles,’ for want of a word of a more determinate signification. By a principle of nature in this place, I mean that foundation which is laid in nature, either old or new, for any particular manner or kind of exercise of the faculties of the soul; or a natural habit or foundation for action, giving a person ability and disposition to exert the faculties in exercises of such a certain kind; so that to exert the faculties in that kind of exercises, may be said to be his nature. So this new spiritual sense is not a new faculty of understanding, but it is a new foundation laid in the nature of the soul, for a new kind of exercises of the same faculty of understanding. So that new holy disposition of heart that attends this new sense, is not a new faculty of will, but a foundation laid in the nature of the soul, for a new kind of exercises of will (*Reader* 161).

Spiritual feeling is “new” because it effects a change in natural habits—*without being identified with those particular habits*. It is the newness, what Emerson calls “onwardness,” that matters, and only in this sense is Christian practice identified. The operation of this practice can then be best clarified by understanding it as a self-referential distinction. Religious feelings are the repetition of a difference from the habits they give rise to, a re-entry of the distinction into itself. True religion, then, is an engagement, not a doctrine: “That religion which God requires, and will accept, does not consist in weak, dull and lifeless wishes, raising us but a little above a state of indifference: God, in his Word,

greatly insists upon it, that we be in good earnest, fervent in spirit, and our hearts vigorously engaged in religion” (*Reader* 143). This is a hard requirement, as it requires a certain passivity. One does not grasp religious feeling, one is grasped by it. The signs of saintliness are only demonstrated in Christian practice, and thus no actual habitual practice at all. One cannot set ones watch by God, who dispenses His grace as He sees fit: “...it was never God’s design to give us any rules, by which we may certainly know, who of our fellow professors are his, and to make a full and clear separation between sheep and goats: but that on the contrary, it was God’s design to reserve this to himself, as his prerogative. And therefore no such distinguishing signs as shall enable Christians or ministers to do this, are ever to be expected to the world’s end” (*Reader* 154). Spiritual feeling persists as the unmarked side of every distinction, and there is no final sign.

Systems and Self-Organization

“Noise destroys an order, the order of discourse; it also announces another order. Disorder is the end of order and sometimes its beginning. Noise turns around, like a revolving door. The beginning or the end of a system for the former; an entrance or exit for the latter. Exclusion, inclusion.”
—Michel Serres (244).

A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections represents from the perspective of theology an account of something very much like Peirce’s Musement. As Edwards developed his religious questioning from within the protocols of theology and Puritan homiletic doctrine, demonstrating self-limiting forms from within those disciplines, Peirce would do the same in his own chosen disciplines of logic, science, philosophy, including of course the “ugly” one he invented for himself known as pragmatism. His religious musings are usually confined to tantalizing digressions peppered throughout a body of work that is

most certainly not short of digressions in general, of every conceivable sort. Outside of the “Neglected Argument,” then, it is tempting to argue that Peirce had no truly developed idea of the role of religion in his philosophy, that it was merely yet another field in which Peirce felt himself compelled to dabble. Michael Raposa’s *Peirce’s Philosophy of Religion* corrects this tendency while maintaining that the “Neglected Argument” “represents both the maturest form of his thought and one of the very few extended treatments of a religious topic produced by him during a lifetime of philosophizing” (3). As much is evident by the volume of criticism attending the essay, in which Peirce’s argument for the existence of God is exhaustively connected or differentiated from the vast history of that seemingly bottomless topic. What makes Peirce’s argument a novelty, at least at the time it was written, is the focus on imagining a God in keeping with scientific process. Douglas Anderson points out that Peirce was relatively hostile to mainstream theological thought for the reason that it did not allow for revision. As Peirce writes, “Religious truth having once been defined is never to be altered in the most minute particular” (CP 1.40). By contrast, Peirce’s conception of religion dovetails neatly with his conception of science as process. Anderson goes on to say, “The ‘Neglected Argument’ thus seems to have developed out of Peirce’s ongoing dual interests in the practice of religion and the thinking of science, logic, and philosophy. It is the fullest attempt he made to illustrate the continuity of religion and science, to show that they need not be fundamentally antagonistic tendencies in one’s life, despite the tension between their spirits” (137).

Peirce’s argument for the reality of God thus bears directly on his conception of the scientific method, particularly hypothetical thinking, alternately called retrodution or abduction. As Anderson notes, for Peirce, “induction and retrodution face opposite directions” (161). For Anderson, this means they meet in the middle and form a

continuity, as the “Neglected Argument” shows “a link between ‘direct experience’ and ‘instinct’” as well as a “continuity between perceptual judgment and abductive inference” (167) and finally between theory and practice: “Peirce reveals the humble argument as functioning at the boundary between instinctive, perceptual judgment and abductive inference; within the confines of a single developing belief, God’s reality begins, then, to work simultaneously in two directions. In one direction, it begins to supply an ideal for the conduct of life; in the other, it leads us to pursue its nature as an explanatory hypothesis. Having come to us through instinct and scientific reflection, it now suggests consequences for practice and theory” (170). Ultimately, “we acquire a belief that performs two jobs and whose wholeness is born of tension” (170). Such dialectical formulations will be familiar to any reader of Peirce. But it is possible to build from Anderson’s approach by arguing that the “Neglected Argument” can be read more precisely by examining what the nature of such a continuity between religion and science may look like while preserving the “tension” or boundary as an aporia that may be approached but not crossed. Wholeness is abandoned since on this reading continuity may understood as a unity but not an identity. Continuity, in this sense, takes on a relative character, and Peirce hints that even it is not necessarily free from difference. It is a matter of perspective: “The indeterminate future becomes the irrevocable past. In Spencer’s phrase, the undifferentiated differentiates itself. The homogenous puts on heterogeneity. However it may be in special cases, then, we must suppose that as a rule the continuum has been derived from a more general continuum, a continuum of higher generality” (CP 6.191). In other words, continuity can be produced *within* a heterogeneous system of difference through a repetition of the constitutive distinction on just one side. But how?

It may be helpful to consider Francisco Varela's "Not One, Not Two" (note again the double negative) as representing a similar attempt at a triadic philosophy in which "pairs are related but remain distinct" (62). Varela continues, "In our (shall we say) cybernetic or post-hegelian paradigm, dualities are adequately represented by imbrication of levels, where one term of the pair emerges from the other... The basic form of these dualities is asymmetry: both terms extend across levels" (64). Or as he writes elsewhere, "The seeming paradox resides in a two-way movement between levels: 'upward' with the emergence of properties from the constituting elements, and 'downward' with the constraints imposed by global coherence on local interactions" (*Ethical* 61). This paradox introduces the basic form of Peirce's triadic system as well, in which Firstness (moving "upward") and Thirdness ("downward") interact in a mutual fashion all the while embodied in Secondness as "constituting elements" and "local interactions." Varela's formulation of the paradox poses exactly the problem that Peirce's philosophy attempts to frame and eventually answer: how do we account for the mutual existence of both chaos and order without resolving one in the other, or in a final synthesis of a third term? In the particular case at issue here, how do we avoid reducing science to religion, or vice versa?

Michael Raposa writes that "Peirce's religious and scientific concerns cannot be neatly separated from one another, however. He was fully aware of the problematic nature of the relationship between them; but, in general, he construed that relationship in such a fashion that the essence or 'spirit' of religion and that of science are not in opposition. Existing tensions and apparent conflicts are the symptoms not of a fundamental incommensurability but of various human frailties, prejudices, and misconceptions" (10). Again, the opposition is relieved in the form of a hidden or essential identity that fails to preserve the distinction. Raposa unifies the conflict in Peirce's

thought in a humanist framework—essentially using human fallibility to make such a unity comprehensible. The only way to avoid such formulations, to avoid interpreting continuity as identity, is to lean on a self-referential concept of distinction as a unity but *not* an identity. Continuity, in other words, is paradoxically the result of difference, as neither here nor there, as the *discontinuity* of continuity and discontinuity, bouncing us back and forth. There is no resting in the bivalent symmetry of a dualistic opposition. Consider, for instance, how Anderson analogizes Peirce's desire to leave feelings open for revision, referring to the well-known duck-rabbit illusion: "If one definitely 'sees' a duck, why look for a rabbit? However, Peirce argues, if we look closely or, better, if we reflect, we will notice that this 'Idea' functions as a hypothesis, as the first step in an inquiry that must be pursued in controlled and critical fashion" (170). The tension of the duck-rabbit takes the form of a Derridean undecidable since any decision confronts its own exclusion: to see a duck means to *not* see a rabbit, and vice versa. A hypothesis, as Anderson indirectly notes, *includes* this difference. Considered as a Third it is a double negative: not a duck, not a rabbit.

How this relates to the duck-rabbit monstrosity of the "Neglected Argument" becomes clear when the essay as a whole, and *Musement* in particular, is interpreted as observing the unity but not the identity of science and religion, observing them instead, to use Luhmann's terminology, as functionally differentiated systems within society. Raposa gestures in this direction by highlighting Peirce's technical use of the term "vague" as indicating a kind of third position:

Yet surely there is some rationale underlying Peirce's claim that religious language is vague of necessity, that it is misleading or issues in falsehood when excessively precise, and that predicate-signs attached with clear meaning to other subjects can

be applied to God only vaguely. His logic of vagueness was a genuinely pioneering effort foreshadowing the kind of work that is now being done in the analysis of fuzzy sets and systems. Furthermore, if such vague symbols are the models most appropriately employed for the representation of a real indeterminacy, then a better understanding of the special logic of their usage seems crucial to the development of a general theory of religious language. For example, seemingly paradoxical utterances about the Deity might be explained in terms of their vagueness, by appealing to a logic that defines the “vague...as that to which the principle of contradiction does not apply” (150).

This approach can be further unfolded through the concept of second-order observation as the observation of a unity that the first-order observation cannot see. This includes above all the observation of the second-order observation’s own first-order observation, thus introducing the paradox of self-reference. The paradox is implicit in Peirce’s description of Musement—since to describe it at all would seem to be a fundamental betrayal of its nature. It occupies what Luhmann calls an imaginary space, the double negative of a Third position:

Everything that is communicated is communicated in society. Everything that happens, occurs in the world. This, too, holds for observations and descriptions, no matter with what kind of authorship (subject, science, etc.) they wish to equip themselves. For this very reason, the unity of society (of the world) cannot be reintroduced in to society (the world). It cannot be observed or described as a unity, especially not on the basis of a representation without competition or on the grounds of some didactic authority. For each observation and description requires a distinction for its own operation. The observation of the One within the One,

however, would have to include what it excludes (that against which it distinguishes its designation). It would have to be enacted in the system (in the world), just as the distinction between self-reference and external reference is enacted in the system (in the world). Such an enactment is possible, and it gives its paradox the form of a "re-entry," but the solution requires an imaginary space (as one speaks of imaginary numbers), and this imaginary space replaces the classical a priori of transcendental philosophy (*Theories* 72).

Luhmann identifies this imaginary space as an ironic repetition of transcendental philosophy. Most importantly, this repetition reproduces itself as a difference and not the identity of an *a priori* principle. Peirce's description of this phenomenon usually involves the intrusion of possibility, chance, or chaos (as entropy) into deterministic systems. In an early essay he writes, "The dissipation of energy by the regular laws of nature is by those very laws accompanied by circumstances more and more favorable to its reconcentration by chance....And from this it follows that chance must act to move things in the long run from a state of homogeneity to a state of heterogeneity" (EP1 221). This passage is quoted by Prigogine and Stengers as an early description of the evolution of complexity in dissipative systems. In *Order out of Chaos*, they write, "The famous law of increase of entropy describes the world as evolving from order to disorder; still, biological or social evolution shows us the complex emerging from the simple. How is this possible? How can structure arise from disorder? Great progress has been realized in this question. We know now that nonequilibrium, the flow of matter and energy, may be a source of order" (xxix). This neatly summarizes what's at issue in the "Neglected Argument," in which Peirce attempts to account for growth as what is now known as emergent complexity—the unaccountable and thoroughly improbable emergence of order.

If the growth and complexity of a system runs parallel to entropy then there is a paradoxical relationship between order and disorder that is best understood as a self-referential distinction. That is, the distinction between order and disorder repeats or re-enters itself on the side of order, producing a progressive enfolding of complexity that increases the autonomy of the system at the same time that it increases sensitivity to the environment. This is the fundamental property of what is known as a self-organizing system, systems that operate based on self-reference. Luhmann writes, “Whatever functions as an external system boundary no longer filters something out, but instead allows more to pass through; at the same time the system, if it is structured differently from the environment, will become more sensitive to the environment insofar as a schematic of differentiation for this function of increasing information has been chosen adequately” (*Social* 194). The system attempts to accomplish the perfect loop of autopoietic closure, but upon its return the starting point is no longer the same—time (as entropy) has passed. As Bruce Clarke shows in his essay “Heinz von Foerster’s Demons,” “No system of any stripe can be adequately treated in the absence of the environment it constitutes for itself by emerging as a system...Although certain systems *do* self-organize, or decrease their internal entropy, they do so only in the presence of conditions provided for elsewhere, by environments that lend a necessary other to the self of self-organization” (*Emergence* 42). Self-organizing systems defy like Maxwell’s Demon the second law of thermodynamics by increasing complexity, understood as an increased capacity for selection, as a reaction to entropy. But, as von Foerster argues, “this term [self-organizing system] becomes meaningless, unless the system is in close contact with an environment, *which possesses available energy and order*, and with which our system is in a state of perpetual interaction, such that it somehow manages to ‘live’ on the expenses of this environment”

(*Understanding 3*). This argument culminates for von Foerster in the “order from noise” principle, in which “no order was fed to the system, just cheap undirected energy; however, thanks to the little demons in the box, in the long run only those components of the noise were selected which contributed to the increase of order in the system” (*Understanding 13*). It is in this way, through the all important system/environment *distinction*, that a system selects or distinguishes its way to self-organization by increasing its own complexity.

Concepts such as self-reference and self-organizing systems are relevant to the “Neglected Argument” because Peirce is concerned in that essay with the phenomenon of growth, a process Peirce often characterizes as an asymptotic approach towards reality because he does not account for a self-organizing system’s increase in sensitivity to the environment—which is to say that a system’s increase of autonomy paradoxically makes it more susceptible to perturbations in the environment. Setting that difficult point aside it is nevertheless true, as Prigogine and Stengers point out, that Peirce’s thought prefigures an understanding of dissipative systems as the emergence of order from disorder. In the “Neglected Argument,” Peirce unfolds this paradox through the hypothesis of God. Peirce’s explicit or “rational” description of the characteristics of God runs in such a circular and confusing manner that it almost resembles a particularly devious Zen koan, but like so much of Peirce’s philosophy it is so with the purpose of inhabiting an imaginary space, the observation of re-entry:

The hypothesis of God is a peculiar one, in that it supposes an infinitely incomprehensible object, although every hypothesis, as such, supposes its object to be truly conceived in the hypothesis. This leaves the hypothesis but one way of understanding itself; namely, as vague but as true so far as it is definite, and as

continually tending to define itself more and more, and without limit. The hypothesis, being thus itself inevitably subject to the law of growth, appears in its vagueness to represent God as so, albeit this is directly contradicted in the hypothesis from its very first phase. But this apparent attribution of growth to God, since it is ineradicable from the hypothesis, cannot, according to the hypothesis, be flatly false. Its implications concerning the Universes will be maintained in the hypothesis, while its implications concerning God will be partly disavowed, and yet held to be less false than their denial would be. Thus, the hypothesis will lead to our thinking of features of each Universe as purposed; and this will stand or fall with the hypothesis. Yet a purpose essentially involves growth, and so cannot be attributed to God. Still it will, according to the hypothesis, be less false to speak so, than to represent God as purposeless (EP2 440).

Here Peirce dispenses with the protocols of clear and rational argumentation (or more precisely puts them in overdrive) to such a degree that it is difficult to take away anything more than a headache. But this passage represents nothing so much as a certain well-worn theological tradition of describing God's indescribability. For example, Nicholas of Cusa's theology understands God as the "absolute maximum" but interprets this as *process*, one not unlike Peirce's triadic semiotics: "The maximum unity, therefore, is not other than indivision, distinction, and connection" (99). I'd like to understand Peirce's passage above as following this three-step process, in particular the process of hypothetical reasoning as a self-referential distinction. The hypothesis of God understands itself as a contradiction. In other words, this particular quality of feeling is itself the

product of a distinction. As Cusa writes, “For God causes not-being to enter into being and being to enter into not-being” (211).

The hypothesis understands itself as true and definite only insofar as it is marked with falsity and indefiniteness. The hypothesis itself, the very irruption of religious feeling, is marked through with a distinction (definite/indefinite, or true/false) that cannot observe its own unity, but only re-enter itself on one side. And for this reason the hypothesis cannot rest as itself, but enacts a second-order observation of itself, and thus must grow beyond itself and re-contain itself in a double gesture, approaching God without ever arriving. In a passage that could come straight out of Peirce’s own essay, Cusa writes, “So the intellect, which is not truth, never comprehends truth so precisely but that it could always be comprehended with infinitely more precision” (91). This is because all observations are constituted by a *distinction*, and so cannot grasp the unity of the world except as its erasure. The unmarked space escapes determination, growth, and even purpose as those qualities re-enter on the side of order—as if God leaves them behind in a world now marked by His absence. Which is to say that order, growth, and purpose (the reductions of entropy) are the products of a distinction, while the mystery of “conditions provided for elsewhere” remains on the other side. Much like religious feeling for Edwards, these qualities represent the repetition of a difference. In this respect, God represents the paradoxical unity of every distinction—the exclusion, maybe even the sacrifice, that makes the world possible, and makes it new.

Conclusion

“The Assistance of Grace”

“There is, however, nothing more wholesome for us than to find problems that quite transcend our powers and I must say, too, that it imparts a delicious sense of being cradled in the waters of the deep,—a feeling I always have at sea.”

—Charles S. Peirce (CP 8.263).

In *American Puritanism and the Defense of Mourning* Mitchell Breitwieser notes that Perry Miller’s influential scholarship on the Puritans derives from a fascination for the negative theology of Karl Barth. In particular, what Breitwieser terms a “dialectical negativity” resembles in some respects what I have been calling a double negative:

Criticism’s inquiry into the dialectical negativity of Puritan typologism follows almost inevitably from the work of Perry Miller, whose allegiance to the negative theology of Barth, Tillich, and Niebuhr led him away from what was in his time the prevailing view of Puritanism as a static body of dogmatic affect and into the dialectical energetics that he called the marrow of Puritan divinity. Whether in praise or blame of Puritanism, the critics with whom he chose to disagree failed to perceive, according to Miller, its essential commitment to Calvin’s unknown god...Cataclysm rather than code, Miller’s unknown god lies beyond the possibility of adequate articulation in word or image—a god to be experienced in awe and dread, but not thought, spoken or translated into practice (25).

Breitwieser takes Miller’s argument to mean that the Puritan must, intellectually at least, take all actual forms and institutions as bereft of the actual truth of God, as “more or less embarrassing capitulations to necessity” (27). As Breitwieser writes, “However much

Miller may individually admire the practical compromises made by these theologues caught in the ‘coils’ of present necessity, and however much he may insist that his heroes never forgot the ‘leap’ into the inscrutable, he nevertheless regards the move to administration as the commencement of a decline into the dry rationalism of the bourgeois Enlightenment. The social articulation of the Protestant genius adulterates and betrays it, confining that genius to sporadic subsequent resurrections like those of Edwards and Emerson” (26). In opposition to Miller, Breitwieser argues that such capitulations to necessity were not perceived merely as failures, but involved a “conception of negation as the refinement of holy society through the work of history rather than the incessant demolition of all attempts to socialize the good” (27). In this respect, Breitwieser sees Puritan institutions as involved in something resembling progress without presuming the ultimate appropriation of the hidden God: “I am not challenging Miller’s argument that the theology of the unknown god was a durable factor in the ideology of the American Puritans, but rather contending that they chose to see positive institutionalization as a triumphal passage out of the interlude of the negative rather than as a regrettable accommodation to the practical demands of worldliness” (28).

Breitwieser extends his point with a reading of Hegel’s contention that the sublimation of grief (which is to say the sublimation of affective attachments to what is singular in experience) constitutes a necessary sacrificial act that props up the hermeneutic dominance of the social order. Breitwieser’s book, however, is principally about how grief resists sublimation and operates as an outside intrusion into systems of meaning, a disharmonious force on the margins, using a concept he can only thematize as a form of realism:

...though the idea of a coherent reality distinct from the work that legitimates the work on the basis of a criterion of mimetic adequacy has been discarded, there is nonetheless a largely consistent attention to an *X* that breaks into or through the work's aspiration to formal and ideological coherence, an aspiration that motivates the work's positing of a guaranteeing or legitimating reality. I feel like I'm trying to pick up a dime with a thick glove here, but I want to suggest that all this attention to a surreptitious getting-through amounts to a different way of seeing literary realism, as a transcription of reality's astonishing and at least discursively hurtful impact on systems of coherent representation. I do not mean that what I call the real at this point has an extradiscursive, extratextual, or extrahistorical authority, all of which propositions ultimately dissolve into logical absurdity, but that it exceeds the specific coherence the writer intends to achieve—even if this exceeding is a contrary intention (12).

We may pause at this liminal point of tension to note Hegel's long shadow which seems to trail even the most assiduous attempts to reach beyond the dialectic. It would seem that even the most self-suspecting of gazes cannot curtail the force of a recuperative effect, a bringing together that erases in effect the turbulent force of astonishment. We cannot, as it were, remain in suspense for very long, as one cannot be at home on a staircase.

There remains a longing to harmonize the difference, to recover and bring back into the fold our exclusions and losses, to stop this exhausting pull in two directions. All at the same time there is a persistent negativity which perceives all worldly forms as declension, as a continuous falling away from divinity (as if the very act of creation was itself a fall, a difference or negation of God) and what Breitwieser sees as progressive refinement through negativity, an onwardness with the divine as the ultimate unreachable

horizon. All at once there is both the falling away and the coming closer, progress and a regress, moving backwards and forwards at the same time, or maybe (with Derrida) simultaneous protention and retention. Or even (with Peirce) an expansion and contraction that projects at once into independence and draws into harmony. As if God's absence somehow signified his presence. Miller's words, as always, mark the dilemma as well as anyone: "The law, which no man can perfectly fulfill anymore, exists as a 'school-master,' it teaches us what we should do, whether we can or no, and as soon as we realize that we cannot, we flee to Christ for the assistance of grace. And since Christ has satisfied God by fulfilling the law, there is no necessity that we do it also. It is only necessary that we attempt it" (*Errand* 82). If the task was, by Miller's estimation, one of "bringing God to time and reason" (*Errand* 56), to live by an impossible law, then for the Puritan the attempt (and therefore failure) is the utmost achievable form, achievable as *unachievable*. As Emerson puts it, "The ardors of piety agree at last with the coldest skepticism,—that nothing is of us or our works,—that all is of God" (*Prose* 207). But in "Fate" this notion itself flips over: "But if there be irresistible dictation, this dictation understands itself. If we must accept Fate, we are not less compelled to affirm liberty, the significance of the individual, the grandeur of duty, the power of character" (*Essays* 943). There is a sense of being in two places at once, like some exotic sub-observable particle, the "double consciousness" of everything becoming its contrary: "how fate slides into freedom, and freedom into fate" (*Prose* 278).

What is at work in this entangling and enfolding of order and disorder, fate and freedom, the finite and infinite—the one always within the other? In another framework Prigogine and Stengers ask, "Are there two sciences, two truths for a single world?" (209). Not one, and not two. Thrown irreversibly into time, into process as the repetition of a

difference, modernity cannot but interpret this predicament as being thrust upon the terror of an abyss, the death of the *unseen*. Is there another way? As Stengers asks, “Can’t irreversibility, or the increase of entropy, be given a positive meaning?” (*Cosmopolitics* 215). There is perhaps a different kind of thought, a thinking not of privation, lack, or loss but something like gratitude or reception, a passivity or openness as in Peirce’s vision of Musement: “Enter your skiff of Musement, push off into the lake of thought, and leave this breath of heaven to swell your sail. With your eyes open, awake to what is about or within you, and open conversation with yourself; for such is all mediation” (EP2 437). This thought transforms the threatening abyss into a calm expanse of water, horizons on all sides, a state of mind also reflected in Whitman’s notion that “all goes onward and outward, nothing collapses. And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.” Do we not find here an experience which is not the annihilation of an individual self but its expansion and articulation (it is both) through an indefinite and unlimited community?

There is a sense in which Peirce’s idea of community excludes our entry. “Sacrifice your own perfection,” Peirce tells us, “to the perfectionment of your neighbor” (EP1 353). This is a vision of community as what is radically other to the self or individual, a community that, as Peirce’s maxim implies, depends on something like self-sacrifice or self-abandonment. Emerson notes as much when he says “This insight throws us on the party and interest of the Universe, against all and sundry; against ourselves, as much as others” (*Prose* 270). The attachments of yesterday and today are met with an unsurpassable limit, and in this way broach the unlimited. We cannot cross over, but we may be carried:

It seems to me that we are driven to this, that logicity inexorably requires that our interests should *not* be limited. They must not stop at our own fate, but must embrace the whole community. This community, again, must not be limited, but must extend to all races of beings with whom we can come into immediate or mediate intellectual relation. It must reach, however vaguely, beyond this geological epoch, beyond all bounds. He who would not sacrifice his own soul to save the whole world is, as it seems to me, illogical in all his inferences, collectively. Logic is rooted in the social principle (Peirce CP 2.654).

Beyond all bounds, beyond the anxious preservation of a self into what Emerson calls “the majesty into which we have suddenly mounted, the impersonality, the scorn of egotisms, the sphere of laws...we are as men in a balloon, and do not think so much of the point we have left, or the point we would make, as of the liberty and glory of the way” (*Essays* 955). We may sail on the winds of a thought into a realm that leaves our paltry selves behind, into what Edwards would call the newness of a spiritual revelation, what is for Peirce the continued creation of the universe. It is for this reason that Peirce claims, “The supreme commandment is to complete the whole system,” not because it is possible in this life, but because it isn’t (or is it both?): “In fulfilling this command, man prepares himself for transmutation into a new form of life, the joyful Nirvana in which the discontinuities of his will shall have all but disappeared” (CP 1.673). We are paradoxically afforded a view of a unity we cannot see (which is to say we are afforded a view of a paradox) through the momentary exultations of the new, of the improbable and unaccountable emergence of order from chaos.

Peirce’s community, like Emerson’s impersonal, may only be accomplished through a surpassing or exceeding of the self through a love given to the other: “There

are those who believe in their own existence, because its opposite is inconceivable; yet the most balsamic of all the sweets of sweet philosophy is the lesson that personal existence is an illusion and a practical joke. Those that have loved themselves and not their neighbors will find themselves April fools when the great April opens the truth that neither selves nor neighborselves were anything more than mere vicinities; while the love they would not entertain was the essence of every scent" (Peirce CP 4.69). To take leave of the self as ego, to abandon *self*-love, threatens to plunge one into the bottomless depths of an abyss. It takes some courage to endure this passage, to swim out away from certain safety. But perhaps the threat of drowning is not to be overwhelmed or diffused, but to be isolated and beyond communication, forever apart from any relation. Perhaps the only answer to this threat, the only way to stay afloat, is self-surrender—a commitment to speak even if what is most urgently essential to say can never, finally, be said.

Alone and adrift on the ocean, as Melville writes, "the awful lonesomeness is intolerable. The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it?" (321). How to communicate such isolation? What can be said? Who can speak it? Perhaps there is no coming back, as with poor Pip cast off the *Pequod*, driven mad by an infinite horizon, coming at last to "that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God" (322). Perhaps there is nothing to say. But at the end of *Moby Dick*, Ishmael finds himself in Pip's place, remaining afloat upon a dear friend's coffin, and he returns, he *comes back*, to tell his story. "I am not," as Emerson insisted, "alone and unacknowledged" (*Prose* 29). This is a glimpse of calm waters. As for Michel Serres, "Quiet, serene, no anxiety. The high seas" (253). All rivers run to the ocean.

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